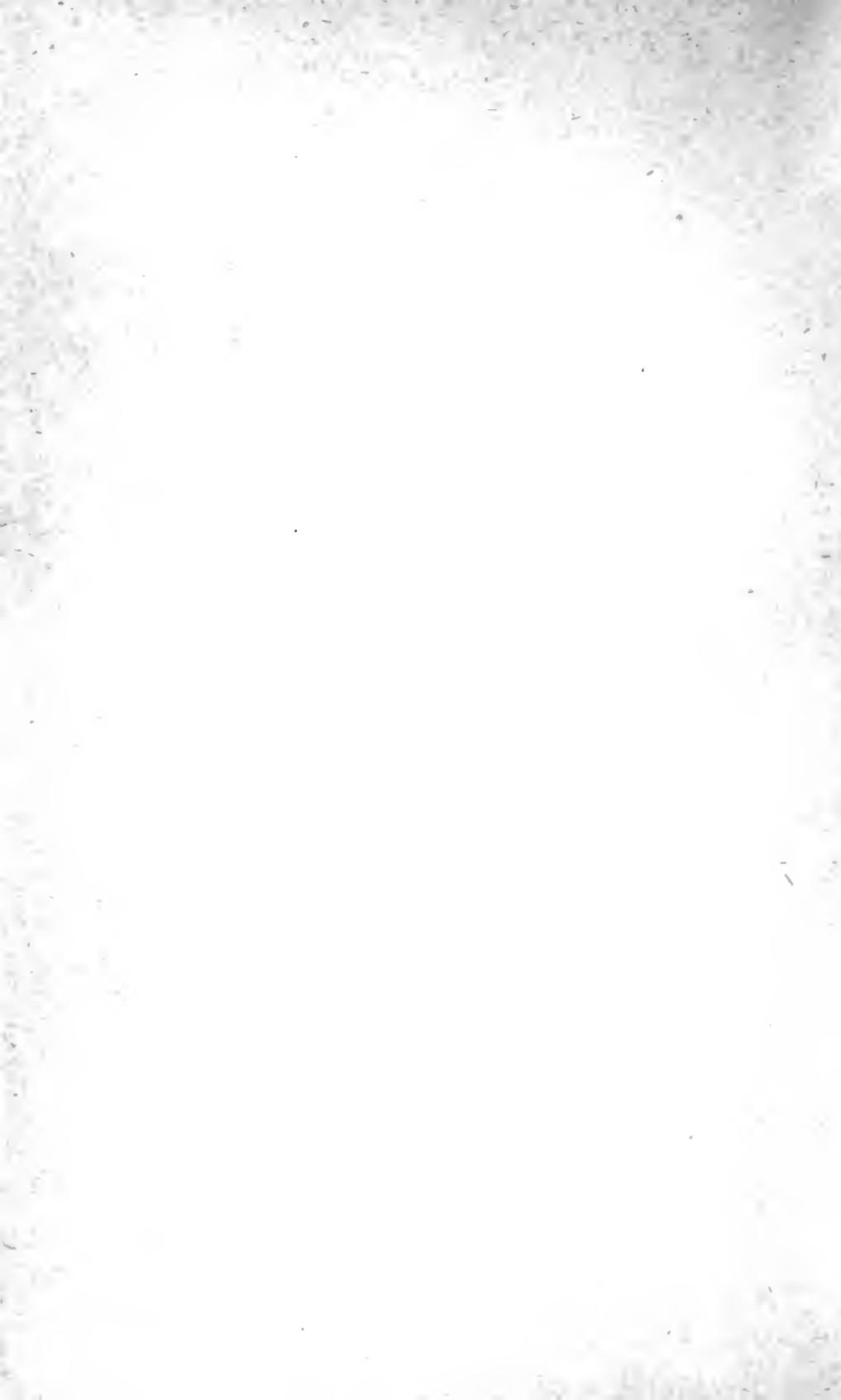


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A W A K I N G.

A W A K I N G.

“Ne'er was a dream so like a waking.”

Shakespeare.

BY

M^{RS.} JOHN KENT SPENDER

AUTHOR OF

“MR. NOBODY,” — “GODWYN’S ORDEAL,” — “BOTH IN THE WRONG,” — “HER OWN
FAULT,” — “KEPT SECRET,” — “LADY HAZLETON’S CONFESSION,”
&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL II.



LONDON:

H U T C H I N S O N & C O.,
25, PATERNOSTER SQUARE.

1892.

PRINTED AT NIMEGUEN (HOLLAND)
BY H. C. A. THIEME OF NIMEGUEN (HOLLAND)
AND
14 BILLITER SQUARE BUILDINGS,
LONDON, E.C.

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C O N T E N T S.

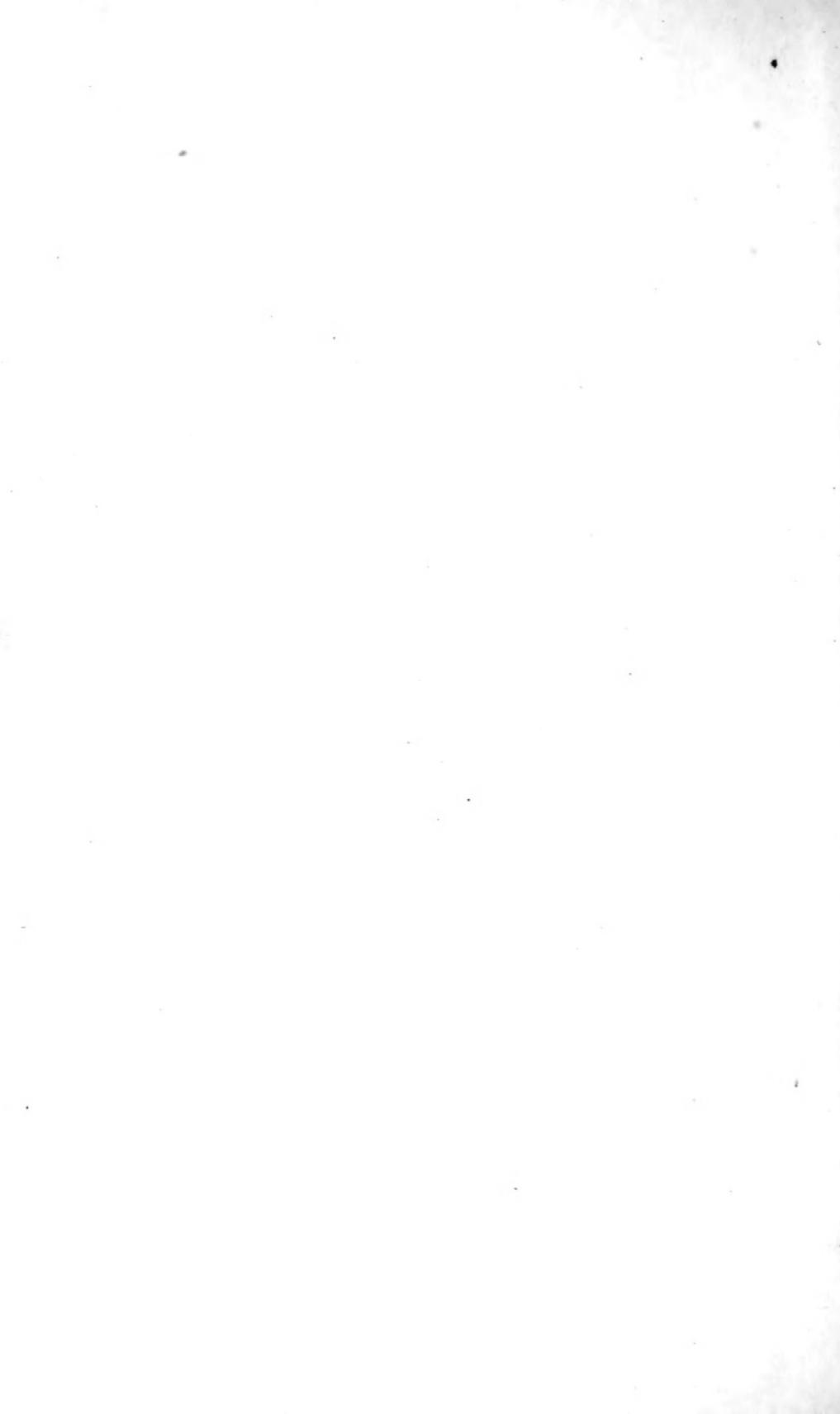
VOLUME II.

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A WAKING.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MOUNTAIN WALK.

No after-recollections could dim the memory of some of these expeditions. There was one in which a party, consisting of a German family, and two Swiss ladies—old enough to take Zina under their care—with George Layton and a couple of guides, set out for Monte Moro, intending to see as much as possible of the road to Macugnaga.

They started at an early hour in the afternoon,

passing the little chapel with models of arms and legs hanging upon its plaster-walls to testify to the *naïve* belief in the miraculous powers of St. Joseph.

It was a fête day, and as the people were returning from their orisons, Zina stepped in amongst them beneath the shade of the porch, looking at the toy sheep and cows which had been brought as simple offerings to shew that animals had been cured, or at pictures of whole families imploring the saint for healing, with one of the members lying in bed surrounded by kneeling brothers and sisters, and white-bearded St. Joseph looking down from the clouds ready with his benison.

Gothic windows or stained glass were scarcely needed here; the altar-piece, with its tawdry gilding and the doll in crinoline, supplying all the needs of the superstitious mountain people.

Above were other pictures, of souls in purgatory—crimson flames shooting out from the nether depths, and winged angels looking down from the glory above.

George Layton stood watching, with a shrug which seemed to say, “Is it not well we are outgrowing these ridiculous delusions of Christendom?” With a mocking laugh he followed Zina; it was a part of her attraction that she was as free as he was to scorn all childish beliefs.

“That old hypocrite is paid to teach that humbug,” he said—almost in the words of her own father—as they watched the priest in black garments moving about amongst the women with red handkerchiefs on their heads. “The old rogues could not eke out their living if it were not for the women; but ‘a woman believes according to her feelings’—so says Alphonse

Karr. It goes without saying that Alphonse never knew *you*."

She disliked him for the quotation, and for the air with which he quoted it.

"Oh, you must make excuse for those women," she answered, impetuously. "Think of the storms sweeping over the roofs of these little Alpine villages, and of the stealthy, noiseless snow, choking up the hollows and obliterating all the tracks; think of the perils of those drifts, and the dread of the noiseless avalanche. If *I* were one of those women, I daresay I should be glad enough to cry to all the saints for mercy, and I would make the sign of the cross if I could think it would help me."

But her dislike to his sneer at the expense of her sex was only momentary; she had no time to analyse the sentiment.

The groups about the chapel grew smaller

and smaller, for already the party was disappearing from view of Saas-Fée. They had a fairly long walk before them. First a tramp of two or three miles along a flat valley, then a mile by a lake, and afterwards—before the sun set—they had an ascent to accomplish over snow to the top of the pass.

The easy walking did not take long, and comparatively soon the little party was climbing the ascent, with the village of Saas-im-Grund floating beneath them, in grey mysterious depths, amid the mist as in mid-ocean.

Soon the tops of the houses and the little steeple looked like the masts of ships rising from surging billows. Above them were rocks and crags, with glimpses of *châlets* on the heights, and Zina could gratify her longing to inflate her lungs with the air of the uplands, and drink in the breath of the mountain sides. The light

in her eyes grew brighter, her upper lip curled involuntarily.

"It makes one feel it is good to live, and it is very rarely I feel *that*," she said with a smile, so stirred as to forget her wonted reticence.

Layton watched her with interest. He himself would have preferred to rest after the hurried travelling which had been necessary to make him sure of reaching Saas-Fée before Mrs. Capern and her companion could escape him, instead of running the risk of breaking his neck in struggling over passes.

But there was not much chance of "breaking his neck" in this simple walk. And the lively feeling in Zina's face with the expression of her delight, which was so abrupt, as if in spite of herself, were all part of those unconscious changes of manner which made him feel like exploring an untrodden country.

The experiences of the night were merry ones. For when they reached the *châlet* in which they were to sleep, it was found that the rogue of a proprietor had let it over their heads. A number of English people had already taken possession, and a rubicund face appeared at the window to say it was impossible to make room for anyone else.

Mr. Layton, who was spokesman, insisted in reply on accommodation being made for the ladies, whilst for his own part he added that the men would be content with an outhouse.

A rumbling was heard within, and the rubicund face—which was now seen to belong to the figure of a stout man in queer *déshabillé* but which reappeared on the following morning clad in the respectable garb of an ordinary English clergyman—retreated after heaping up a bombardment, consisting of

pillows and great coats, against the inner door.

The outside room was allotted to the women, but Zina who had little sleep, was stirring early, and longing, if possible, to climb one of the hills, to see the sun rise over the heights.

Little sun was to be seen as yet. Instead, were weird shapes, spectral mysteries, and solemn banks of cloud moving on beneath her in a slow, stately way.

Here and there were tree-tops peeping through the mist, blue-black pines, and feathery larches, but the trooping phalanx of clouds and shimmering mists seemed to hem her in, separating the little piece of earth on which she stood from the world beneath, whilst above rose a glacier-crown and phantom-like peaks.

Zina shivered. There was a ghost-like and mystic unreality about the place which made her feel as if her presence there were a dream.

Or was it that all her previous life—that uncanny story about her poor young mother who had lain dead for so many years in one of the London cemeteries with a cold stone on her breast, that morbid attack of horrors at her father's deathbed, and the defection of the one man for whom, in her false appreciation of his character she had thought it possible to care —was the real dream?

She could hear the sound of a mountain stream trickling past her like a ghost-melody. She had said that she hated music, but the passionate exclamation had not been true, and this stream, as it chanted its purling melodies, seemed to entrance her with its siren voice into another dream of possible happiness which should last, not as it had lasted yesterday, for a few brief moments of ecstacy, but till her pulses ceased to beat.

Once more the voice of Goethe seemed to urge her, "Children, enjoy life!"

The difference between knowing and feeling was always immense with her, and as she stood trembling with a sense of something which she did not understand, and dreading the enslaving of her spirit, she became conscious that George Layton, who had also risen early, was standing by her, gazing at her once more with that intense gaze of admiration which would have attracted attention from the bystanders had he ventured to look at her in that fashion at the crowded hotel.

"You," he said, "have a beautiful idea which is thrilling you with feeling and glorifying your face. Is it the same as mine—that we two mortals are alone in this world, shut away from our kind, and that the little cascade which we cannot see is singing songs to us as it falls into the valley

beneath—songs of freedom and happiness—intended only for our ears?"

She moved a step or two back from him, but she did not answer.

At that moment the sun suddenly conquered the mist, illuminating the scene, and bringing into sharp relief every detail, every peak and yawning chasm beneath; the gloomy forests and wild torrents with their foaming spray, the precipices, the ravines, and the *châlets* like pin-points in the distance.

She gave a cry of instinctive delight—wide-awake instantly to the fingertips, and quivering with excitement from her head to her feet.

"Ah," he said, "you could not judge of the view before, any more than you could judge of a person veiled with innumerable veils."

She did not seem to hear him, for still it was as if mysterious fingers were busily occupied

undrawing first one intercepting veil and then another, disclosing glimpses both of beauty and terror.

For the piece of grass on which she stood was suddenly discovered to be a dome of green, studded with little bushes which shelved down on one side to rust-red crags beneath, below which, far away and quivering through mists, were villages and home-steads like specks in the distance.

Above the lizard-like clouds which still clung round the mountain sides were the silver-tipped Alps, the topmost heights still coquetting with the mists, as if eluding pursuit.

“Oh, wait just a minute or two,” she could have cried to the vision, “till I can fix in my mind what I would remember.”

And then again the relentless clouds, “slow shepherded by the unwilling wind,” seemed to

close around her, and for the first time she heard Layton's voice saying in a more matter-of-fact way, "It was a good thing I followed you when you left the *châlet*. It would not have been safe for you to be here by yourself."

She had forgotten conventionality—the tears were on her cheek. But at the sound of his voice she seemed to wake up to reality.

"We are no longer alone—" she said with a laugh, "there is life all around us."

For it seemed to her in one of her sudden changes of mood, as if she could never again shut out the joy of that Life which was clamouring louder than usual at her door.

Something leapt in her veins to welcome it: something in the expression of this man's face seemed to rouse her from her sleeping palace.

And then, possibly to prevent the awkwardness of taking further notice of his speech—she stooped

to look at a cluster of flowers suddenly revealed close to the snow.

“It is that rare specimen of gentian,” she said, seeing that it was beyond their reach.

In another moment he had swung himself down.

It seemed to her, in the instant of horror, that he hung suspended over the yawning chasm; but before she had time to cry out—closing her eyes that she might not witness the worst, in that moment of dread which seemed to freeze her very blood and choke her utterance—he was again on the short grass by her side, the blood trickling from his hand, for he had torn himself with the sharp stones to get her the flower she coveted.

“Oh!” she cried, when she recovered her power of speech; “how could you do such a thing, to risk your life for so little? It takes away all my pleasure. It makes me shudder.”

It was true, she was trembling in every limb at the recollection of that "Force"—blind and terrible she thought it—of which the phenomena around her were only the expression.

And to hide her nervous excitement, she added almost sharply. "I have read of such things in novels—but I never admired them."

He might have told her that it was not risking his safety, that the feat only required steady nerves and practised muscles, and that he was an accomplished mountaineer.

But he preferred to leave her in her delusion, and said, as he offered her the gentian,

"You have conquered me, subjugated me; and it is my delight to obey your wishes, and yet you are cold—you are frigid, and care nothing for my distress."

Her woman's heart was going out to him as she looked at his bleeding hand, and he pur-

sued his advantage, making no attempt at binding it up, but letting the drops of blood fall on the grass.

“Whether or not you choose to crush and maim my life, to throw it in scorn from you, I shall always love you. I have loved you from the moment I first saw you, though I am a woman-hater—averse in every way to your sex.”

At that moment he scarcely knew that he was lying when he called himself a misogynist.

It was true that he had learnt to despise many of her sex; true also that every fibre in him was thrilling at the sound of her voice when she answered in uncertain tones,

“Give me time; it is scarcely fair to take me by surprise like this. Let me go back to the others, and forget what you have said.”

An inner voice told him that the time she was wishing to give him would be just what was needed to enable him to wrestle with his passion, and yet in his present tumult of anguish and desire there was something seductive and unusual in this quaint reserve.

She had let him unbosom himself to her but she had told him nothing in return; and yet ninety-nine penniless girls out of a hundred would have caught at the offer he made.

"I can wait for your answer," he said, "I have plenty of patience."

Even then there was an irritating suggestion in his manner which reminded her of the old saw, "Everything comes to the man who waits."

Zina felt it in spite of herself, chafing a little at the idea that it was a foregone conclusion that she should accept this man's suit, though

she had so often in he old days railed against marriage, and though her conscience told her she ought to be more careful than ever of any step she took, since Stephen Dewe had proved so unworthy of her affection.

But throughout the excursion which followed there was no escaping from his tender speeches.

She was chary of her own words and indulged in no more raptures, even when they came upon the best view of Monte Rosa, and could look down over the Macugnaga valley. The climbing was difficult and new to her, so that it would have been useless to pretend she was not glad of assistance. The descent had to be accomplished with caution, and George Layton's strong arm was the more valuable in emergencies because one of the guides had proved to be drunken, and the other was

occupied in attending to the demands made upon him by other ladies.

George Layton's years of training, which had accustomed him to mountain-work, proved to be even more useful than he had anticipated. For Zina was suddenly nervous in a way she would not have liked to acknowledge, and made more than one false step, which might have been disastrous had he not caught her when she was stumbling.

On one occasion he caught her rather unnecessarily near to his heart, and there was no one to see or to notice the rich blood mantling to her cheeks; for the curve of the path hid their companions from view, and, over the rugged flanks of the mountains, mists were still floating, sometimes swathing their sides, and making every man and woman look to his or her own footsteps.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FLIPPANT CHAPERON.

IT never occurred to Eva Capern, and still less to Zina herself, to think that George Layton might have put her in a questionable position by the attentions he had chosen to pay to her in so solitary an expedition.

The question of troubling herself too much about the proprieties was one which rarely occurred to Zina. She would scarcely have been able in earlier years to carry on her close acquaintance with Stephen Dewe had she not

been constantly associated with men. Her father had always had a large way of looking at these things, and had often laughed at the majority of women for their small conventionalities, their hundred and one prim rules of etiquette, and she had inherited from him his indifference to such trifles.

George Layton was struck more than ever with admiration when she met him on the following day without any hurry of manner or sign of unusual excitement.

The perfect self-control of this glorious creature would have enabled her to treat him as if nothing at all had happened, had he chosen to ignore the words uttered in an episode of passion. But none the less could he guess, by the expression of her speaking face, that the whole world was glowing and different for her, the skies and the clouds speaking a different language,

and that even the music which she had professed to hate was appealing to her soul once more as it had appealed in happier days.

He found her in the garden. She had been singing to herself, and a book of poetry lay open on her lap. She was reading a piece of Browning's which she had read a hundred times before, but she perceived new meanings in it which she had never perceived till that day.

He sat down by her and took her hand, but at first they did not speak, though latterly these two had been so good at repartee, so ready with impromptu witticisms, that the other people at the hotel would involuntarily listen to them. They had never cared to be brilliant, they had only cared to draw each other out and amuse one another.

Yet this morning both were silent, till the man again urged for an answer to his suit.

“Yesterday,” he said, “I told you I could wait, but to-day I know and feel I cannot. I feel as if your answer had been already given me, and I am like King Agag—the bitterness of death is passed. Still, I count every day lost till I can call you—Wife.”

A nervous thrill of fear shot suddenly through Zina’s veins, with a look which it was well he did not see in the dimness of that garden beneath the trees.

Till that moment she had been thinking of the tempting vista of work in the life which might be before her in the years which were to come; of the mutual inspiration and soul-communion, the delightful interchange of thought, and the possible losing of self in the being of another, which should be the characteristics of the highest form of marriage.

She had intended to speak to him of all this.

But a breath of something unknown seemed to be already blowing across their new intercourse—making her draw her cloak a little closer round her shoulders. She was vexed with him for being so sure of her, and for the sort of easy familiarity with which he used a sacred word. It struck her like a touch of sharp reality.

After all, what did she know of him? And why this unseemly haste without recognising the necessity for submission to the forms of outward life?

It reminded her in an uncomfortable way of some Eva's chatter—"how, after all was said, a woman educated as Zina had been, would be mad if she thought to live alone, or in the atmosphere of dreary economy to be found in Mary Carruthers' house; and how if a woman were truly loved she need not trouble to love much in return—all that would come by degrees."

Eva, who had heard something of Stephen Dewe's defection had not even hesitated to hint that a new engagement would wipe out the horror of that other matter."

"Of course marriage is the natural career of all successful women," she had added scornfully, "and to find oneself getting to a certain age and left in the lurch, is—to make a mess of things." The cruelty of the light words came back to Zina and tormented her.

"They none of them want me," she thought, "They have their own houses, and I have none. I am a tax on them"—And—yet—no such unseemly cause should compel her to take a hasty step.

Had she answered yesterday's question too lightly? She had heard the same question before from the lips of the many men whom she had refused. Had she been weak to admit to

herself that circumstances had changed? Stephen Dewe had not written; he had rendered himself ineligible, even if he were to write now, by the fact of his withdrawal when his presence could have been a protection.

She smiled bitterly when she reminded herself that his wild expressions of attachment must have been simply a boyish malady. The calf-love had been easily cured—and now that she was not likely to be so often molested as in the old days, this older man's matured devotion pleaded for him.

She did not wish to give way to Eva's worldly reasoning, but she was so lonely, so helpless, that she felt her cheek flush and her eyes fill with moisture in the new craving for something which she hardly understood.

Yet it was an impulse to test him which prompted her to say:

"I wish to be good to my kind and to live for large interests—not only those which affect ourselves; that is *my* view of marriage," she said, as she drew the cloak in closer folds over her shoulders.

"Did I not know it?" he cried, in a tone of exultation, "and was it not this which attracted me to you? Wax dolls are antagonistic to me—positively repulsive, and the majority of pretty women are like wax dolls; but there is power in your face.

"As I see it now, with your head thrown back and outlined against the dark foliage of those trees, I rejoice in its power. You shall teach me to lead a nobler life than I have ever led yet; but the sooner we begin to lead it the better.

"Why should we wait? We are neither of us in the bread-and-butter stage of existence;

we left that behind us a good many years ago. You are alone, and not very happy. It is because of your loneliness that I want to hurry our marriage."

"I have known you so short a time," she urged, with a question in her eyes which he scarcely liked to face, "and how can I be sure that I care for— you enough? Or that you will not tire of *me*?"

"I think I understand," he answered patiently. "It is easy to understand that women of your sort never have very much sympathy with the unreason of passion. But, all the same, you must be sorry for me if I cannot take things quite so coolly."

"The love I should like best," she continued, speaking almost as much to herself as to him, "should—like all other good things—have the element of growth in it—it should strike firmer

roots year by year—it should end by glorifying existence—Life should be good with such love—between a man and a woman. But it is just because of that, I think of marriage as an awful experiment."

"You think too much," he said lightly—"you are too ready to bother your little head with high and deep subjects. You should trust more to your intuition, your instincts are sure to guide you rightly. What more can a man tell you than that he too is ready to be guided by any instincts which are good and true?"

She answered somewhat dubiously; perhaps he had scarcely chosen the style of argument likely to be most effective in her case.

In Eva Capern he found an ally who proved to be more diplomatic and able than could have been suspected.

Mrs. Capern could not let such a magnificent

opportunity slip. If she could have ignored Zina altogether the matter would have been different.

But it had been an open secret that Eva had been educated at Stuart Newbolt's expense, when confided to his care by a spendthrift father on his death-bed. For Stuart Newbolt's character had been full of these anomalies. And if Eva could have stopped the mouths of those interfering London gossips who made insolent remarks when they heard that Miss Newbolt had to work for her livelihood, or if she could have silenced the twinges of conscience which reminded her that, in her own orphanhood, Stuart Newbolt had been good to her, it would have been easier to dismiss Zina in her desolate condition altogether from her memory.

In London she had found her absolutely unmanageable when she had planned any scheme

especially for her benefit; nor was it very possible to introduce a woman, however beautiful, in deep mourning robes, to be like a skeleton at the feast, and a reminder of mortality in a gay London house.

But Eva prided herself on being a skilful general, and she had not crossed the Alps and marshalled her forces like Hannibal for nothing. She had not toiled for the last few months, and told any amount of pretty fibs about her invalidism, for nothing.

As soon as Mr. Layton had appeared on the scene, Eva had remarked that he was undeniably handsome, and that she heard he belonged to a tolerably good family, and had money—a combination which made her determine that he had excellent qualities, a beautiful disposition, and was estimable as a man.

She might have wearied Zina by singing his

praises, had not Zina's own opinions inclined in the same direction.

For the first time it appeared as if it were not without reason that Mrs. Capern made friends with all the young men in the various hotels, training them to fetch and carry for her, and fascinating them by her smiles.

For there is safety in numbers, and George Layton, having more than the ordinary English polish, and the faculty of shining in conversation, besides his striking appearance, and his habit of being always well-dressed, contrasted with the others like a sovereign among shillings.

“My dear, you must be hard to please if that man is not good enough for you; he towers like a Saul among the rest of the men—you *are* a fortunate woman!” cried Mrs. Capern in her highfown manner, determining not to let such a magnificent opportunity slip.

She was getting weary of exposing her porcelain complexion to the brilliant sunshine of Switzerland, and was secretly sighing after the pretty drawing-room with festooned tussore curtains in which she received visitors on her day at home.

It was tiresome to know that the delights of the London season would soon be passing, and yet it had been impossible to ignore the fact that prejudices had been afloat concerning her in her "set", and that the atmosphere had been rather heavily charged with ill-natured conjecture ever since it had been understood that Zina Newbolt was working for her bread.

She used an argument which was perfectly true when she remonstrated with Zina, saying decisively, "it is awfully difficult for women of our class to earn their own living," and she was scarcely aware of her own selfishness in

telling herself that Zina's marriage to a rich man would open up new sources of amusement for herself, and be the best stroke of luck which could possibly happen for both of them.

Nevertheless she admitted that she fully recognised the delicacy of the situation, and even offered to write to London, and get her husband to make all the necessary inquiries, keeping the idea to herself of communicating to Zina that part of the information only which she should think most favourable.

Meanwhile Zina was no longer obdurate. She could not shut her ears to the knock which had come at the citadel of her heart, neither could she turn out the traitor of importunate gladness, which was ready to open the gates. And, if the inquiries were satisfactorily answered, it was decided that the wedding should take place in Switzerland in another three weeks, George

Layton having shewn some readiness in fixing that date.

In the normal state of things, Mrs. Capern's determination to manage Zina Newbolt would probably have defeated itself.

Women are proverbially more difficult to be managed by women than by the opposite sex. But the most unmanageable women will suddenly become docile when their own inclinations go hand in hand with their friends' wishes, and so it proved in this instance.

The woman who had gone through so much, and to whom the Fates in her former life had seemed to be so unkind, was ready to succumb. She was tired of holding out. If it were a dream, she was dreaming with her eyes open, and had not even the wish still less the power, to free herself from the spell.

She had so thoroughly fallen into the toils,

and was so ready to yield without a struggle, that Eva's little fiction of making the proper inquiries in London was sufficient to give her confidence, and a sense of being shielded from any possible harm.

She was not suspicious by nature, and did not for a moment suspect that Eva could be disingenuous enough to write, "After all, the inquiries will make very little difference, for my guardian's daughter, as you know, has a strong will of her own—even stronger than mine—and in this case she has made up her mind. You yourself talk about the folly of remonstrating with women when once they have set their minds on anything imperticular. And oddly enough Zina's, inclination squares with mine.

"You would have been grievously disappointed," she said to me the other day, laughing, "if I had not married a man who was tolerably

rich.' He seems to be rich, clever, and up to the mark of good society. What more can we require? And she for once is wisely obstinate, knowing perfectly well that though I am to *seem* to make these inquiries, I am not to tell her anything which would lead to a rupture. Well, she is intensely inaccurate like nearly all dreamers; she never dates a letter and has no sense of time, so she can't expect you to give her *very* precise details."

And so the days passed pleasantly enough. Mrs. Capern, who was in reality counting the hours when she should be back in more enlivening society, was amiable in the emergency with that good humour and want of principle which so often go hand in hand.

She was making the best of a situation which gave her opportunities for sweet millinery talks, the few necessary articles for Zina's trousseau

being purchased by the maid who undertook expeditions to Montreux or Lausanne for that purpose.

Mrs. Capern could be niggardly enough in these purchases, but she was anxious to keep on good terms with Mr. Layton and it won her heart to find that he had a knowledge of what would be needed which seemed to come to him intuitively, and a diplomatic cleverness on which he prided himself, and which she admitted nearly to equal her own.

They worked together in favour of a short engagement, Eva emulating that transparent truthfulness in this matter which she usually blamed as so tiresome in Zina.

“I do not wish to hasten you,” she said, at the same time managing to convey the impression that to make Mr. Layton wait longer would not only be unwise but embarrassing to herself, and

that to linger later in Switzerland would be to demand an amount of self-abnegation from her, hardly to be expected from flesh and blood.

Meanwhile, surrounded by young fellows, with whom as usual she condescended to flirt, and elegant as ever in the languor caused by the warm weather, she was never more skilful in her tactics, and smiled sweetly when a letter, which she declared to be all that could be desired, was returned to her with the necessary information from her husband.

Eva Capern had not only no wish to keep ministering to what she would have called Zina's fastidious objections, but she had no occasion to equivocate or to make use of ambiguous phrases, for Zina, easily satisfied for once, questioned her very little. And Mrs. Capern was as contented as she pretended to be, being herself one of the women whose affections, if they

possess any, are of the absolutely indiscriminating kind.

She was not generally romantically inclined, but her sympathies were evidently with the bridegroom, and she hinted that Zina had been a little unkind in keeping her ardent lover so long waiting for his final answer, and that other women would have thought it foolish to dally with such a chance.

In her heart she was somewhat surprised, but reasoned that if the girl were in love she could scarcely expect her perceptions to be as quick, or her judgment as sharp, as on other occasions.

“Of course he thinks *you* far superior to the rest of your species. The spectacles of a man in love are proverbially rose-coloured—ditto with a woman,” she said half beneath her breath.

“Oh, I know what you feel, though you do

not show it," she added, a little provokingly, her theory being that the only philosophic way of discovering whether women like Zina were in love consisted in reading them backwards, and interpreting their speeches as if they were a kind of puzzle.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

To escape from chatter of this sort. Zina was thrown more than ever into George Layton's society.

It is true that she had seldom been more happy in her life, and though the happiness was not a fact on which she would have enlarged to Mrs. Capern—to whom she generalised, as women are said to generalise when they wish to hide their strongest emotions, shewing an inclination to laugh whenever George Layton was

over-praised—yet she was evidently in good spirits, and the time did not lag with her.

Her old confidence in her own intuition had so thoroughly returned, that she was not only inclined to think with Eva that all mysteries had been cleared up, but that, if there had been any real mystery from the first, she should certainly have known it by the instinctive antagonism which made her dislike those who were to be distrusted.

Sometimes indeed, when she allowed herself to think of her quickly approaching marriage, her heart sank a little, and it seemed to her as if she were setting out on a new and exciting voyage to unexplored regions of which she knew little more than Columbus had known of the new world when he sailed for America, or Livingstone of Lake Nyanza when he set out for Africa.

There might be all sorts of dangers to be encountered, and she was forced to admit that she had no chart to guide her; she knew little of the previous life or peculiarities of the man she was about to marry, though Eva's successful enquiries had given her to understand that she was about to pledge herself to one who had not only money and good connections, but an unblemished reputation.

She had noticed that one of the old maids at the hotel who had been friendly to her before, had cut short all her attempts at conversation lately, with an odd sort of snort of disapproval.

Uncharitably keen-eyed spinsters had indeed seen through Eva as a reckless match-maker, but sharp-tongued as some of the people were, they had hesitated to condemn the girl of husband-hunting.

Then a new shock came upon her.

It was three days before the date which had been fixed for her marriage, when, on going into her bedroom, she found a letter lying on her dressing-table, written in a handwriting which she did not recognise. Supposing it to be from one of the tradespeople, she opened it slowly, and read it with absent eyes, till suddenly its full meaning dawned on her intelligence.

The letter was anonymous, and affected to be kind.

“Forgive me for the interest which prompts
“me to write to you even at the eleventh
“hour.

“I should advise you to ask some of your
“friends—male friends who are more to be
“trusted than the flippant lady who chaperons
“you—for your own sake, and before you

“make up your mind to take the rash step

“you are contemplating at present

“There are many ways of avoiding the
“legality of marriages in foreign countries.

“In Switzerland a marriage is not legal
“between two British subjects, when the
“English Consul is absent.

“Enquire for yourself—you will find he is
“away at present. Ask if you are to be
“married at an Embassy or Consulate.”

She read the letter with a cold thrill; but indignation and anger succeeded to her first sense of alarm.

To confide perfectly in anyone was impossible; neither could she believe such unpleasant communications as these.

Would not Eva—hating worries of every kind—sneer at her for attaching any importance to such a malign letter, and treat all her ques-

tions with cynical indifference? Had not Eva already accused her of being unkind to one who loved her, suspecting mysteries where there were no mysteries to be cleared up?

“Do you not suppose that I should keep *my* eyes open? My maid hears all the gossip, and yet never a word has been breathed against Mr. Layton?” Mrs. Capern had said to her a fortnight before. No, whatever torments she might have to endure, Zina would have preferred to conceal the hidden anguish.

Since the engagement had taken place Eva had ceased to patronise her; she had become indeed all sugar-sweetness, but Zina’s natural instinct of selfpreservation prompted her to keep her pain to herself.

Nothing could be more hateful to her than Eva’s way of ignoring her, and looking through her instead of at her, when she took her to task

for her “ridiculous notions” and reminded her that all men were not moulded on one type, and that every man must be allowed to have his own peculiarities. It was true that Zina Newbolt had not hitherto been able to afford the luxury of being proud; but Eva’s interference had been galling to her.

“I am surely old enough to be able to manage my affairs for myself,” she said, ensconcing herself in her armour of reserve, “but I suppose I *must* tell her.”

“I don’t think she is at all easy to understand,” one of the gossips at the hotel had said about Zina, giving up the problem of solving the riddle of her character. “One likes her very much, but there is something which at times makes one feel uncomfortable.”

“You would like her to be more conventional,

and you despise that *something*," another lady had answered.

Yet all of them had pitied her. No gentleman was with her, and the wits of women of Mrs. Capern's stamp are so often singularly inapprehensive.

Had the anonymous letter come earlier, it might have shaken Zina's confidence, and startled her out of her new happiness. But she had so far made up her mind that, when she read it over a second time, it seemed to her, as it seemed to Eva—when at last she made up her mind to take the prejudiced Mrs. Capern into her confidence,—the concoction of jealousy, malice, and concentrated wickedness, and when she read it a third time she thought it not even worth her attention.

"All this is so very silly, so poorly and weakly written—like most anonymous letters, ill-advised,

even if well-meaning—if there is a foolish rule of this kind about the Swiss Consul, it is just as likely as not that George did not know it himself," she said to herself, not perceiving that her own wits were confused.

Yet sleep was impossible that night. And, when the intended bridegroom came to see her on the following morning, she determined to put the question to him herself, and to abide by his way of answering.

George Layton drew a sharp breath. His own apprehensions had almost ceased.

Now that he could count the days on his fingers to that of the wedding, it was ridiculous to be met with this mysterious menace, as if at the very last the woman he loved could escape him.

"What ridiculous nonsense they do talk!" he said almost irritably. "Fancy having to delay

our marriage for a mere punctilio of that sort! I should have thought you were the last woman to be the slave of convention."

There was a downward inflection in the tone of her voice as she answered.

"You know we agreed long ago that, so long as such conventions are necessary for the well-being of society, we could not be too punctilious about them. If it were only a registry office it would be the same thing, but you told me that you thought as well as I did that all legal rites must be carefully considered."

"Oh for the matter of that," he began, "all these ideas about legal marriage differ in different countries, a Scotch marriage being a mere declaration, and a Roman Catholic one hampered by all sorts of difficulties. Do not let our ideas become confused about the *real thing*—there would be no end to the mischief if we once

let ecclesiastics dictate the laws of our marriages."

"But the religious service is optional" she said.

He tried to take her hand and draw her nearer to himself, as he continued, "The truest marriage is a union between congenial hearts—all these conventional enactments will become obsolete in time, but nothing can be obsolete when two are made one in absolute trust and sympathy. What a conventional little woman it is, in spite of priding itself on its freedom of thought! Are women ever *really* free, or are they merely passive creatures? How easy it is to scare them with logic!"

A flame of fire shone in her face, and she drew back a step or two when he attempted to touch her.

"Answer me as you would answer in the

sight of God—did you know of the absence of the Consul when you fixed that special date for our marriage—did you mean to ignore the consulate?"

His breath came and went quickly.

The day was not a warm one, but the pores of his skin were so moist that he looked as if he must beat a retreat from the heat.

The blood rushed darkly into his face, yet he knew that the crisis was imminent, and he gazed back at her steadily, never moving his eyes from hers.

"Not to have inquired into these things gives people all sorts of suspicions," she continued.

"*What* suspicions?" he asked sternly, changing his bantering tone to that of a man who is outraged, and it seemed as if the harshness of his voice relieved her. "Did you think I was in earnest—that, whatever I might say about

the abstract question, it was possible I could deceive *you*, or any other woman who confided in me?—How can you forgive me for supposing you would have preferred to be married according to the rites of the church? I suppose you think I ought to have inquired into this other matter, but I did not know."

"I knew it was a mistake," she said, with a rapid look at him, as she lifted her head. The remnant of the vanishing fire was still shining in her face, but her voice had already softened.

He tried to take her hand and kiss it, he even prostrated himself at her feet, saying in his tenderest tones, "Dear, what did you think—that even if I were a blackguard, I could be such a selfish cur as *that*? I am bad enough, but not so bad or so cruel as my enemies would make me out."

But she was not so easily mollified, and the

style in which he spoke jarred on her sensitive nerves. Her eyebrows went up.

“I do not believe in anyone being inveterately cruel,” she said beneath her breath, “I know it is the fashion to make a hard, cut-and-dried demarcation between the good and the bad, but I never yet met with a person who was all bad—or all good,” she added, sinking her voice to a whisper.

“Would you like to punish me by making me wait? I will wait for months, or years, if you like,” he said, still in that deferential tone by which he veiled the struggle in his heart.

“A woman is all the better for having a few foolish fancies—foolish they would be called in men,” he was saying to himself; “but women are delicate susceptible creatures, and it is a part of their delicacy to invent torments for themselves.”

Then he said aloud, "I should like things properly done, as well as yourself—we shall have to wait for the necessary date: it will involve a very slight delay."

She only answered by an exclamation which seemed to be wrung from her: "Oh, what a merciful thing we found it out in time!"

Her emotions were too strongly excited for her to notice that he did not echo the cry. He had thought of her as a prize not to be let slip from mere carelessness, and then—as the difficulties increased—his earnestness and ardour in hunting down the game which eluded him had proved correspondingly great.

But for the first time it struck him that the price which he would have to pay for the prize would be heavier than he had counted on. It could not be that she was like the majority of

women who made this show of respectability a sort of profession.

He dared not hint that she was overscrupulous. For the burden of speech was on her, and there were tears in her voice.

“You tell me solemnly you did not know this, or that if you knew it you had forgotten?” she insisted once more before she would draw nearer to him.

In other women the anxious speech would have irritated his nerves by its senseless repetition. But she looked so to advantage as she stood with her bosom heaving, her features lit up by her emotion, and her great eyes fixed entreatingly on him, that—where in other cases he might have answered with a meaningless imprecation—his voice shook a little as he responded :

“Before Heaven and earth I tell you I never

as much as thought of it. It is such a ridiculous rule to make, and I am an absent-minded man. All my friends give me that bad character. Nothing but marriage can cure me of the faults of a lifetime."

"*I believe you*, I could not look into your eyes and hear you talk like that and not believe you," she repeated as solemnly, sinking on a seat as if her trembling limbs refused to bear her any longer.

Her instincts of revolt had been just, but they were over-ridden. Her belief in his absolute sincerity was restored, and she threw the letter into the grate, which was close by her side, tearing it into innumerable pieces, with a little joke at the idea that the anonymous writer could have hoped to destroy the bond between them.

She never again mentioned the matter to anyone, and it did not occur to her till afterwards to

think it strange that Eva should have preserved so odd a silence when she found that the marriage was necessarily delayed, though her own return to England was interfered with in consequence.

More than once Mrs. Capern had blamed her for attaching any importance to the conduct of the other women in the hotel.

“Don’t flare up at trifling things—use your common-sense,” had been her constant advice to Zina.

And yet she herself seemed inclined to get up an indignant bluster about a mere trifle, when she added inconsistently :

“How ridiculous you are! As if you did not know how jealous other women can be, and how they would give worlds to be in your place!”

Afterwards Zina remembered how she had added that they would be, “the sort of people

to spring a lot of nonsense upon you like a rocket, just when you were comfortable!"

Zina's pride forced her to keep her own counsel and to try to put the matter out of her mind.

But long afterwards she had a suspicion, with a pang which she could not hide, that the married woman who should have been her best protector knew more of the true bearing of what had happened than she ever revealed.

Her own shyness kept her silent, and a fit of shyness came over her when, one day before the marriage actually took place, George Layton tried again to allude to it—after all it was so uncomfortable.

"I am so ashamed of myself to have been so careless," he laughed a little nervously, "as so nearly to have made a mistake which would have seemed such a dreadful one in your

eyes; although it would have been all the same, you know, in the eyes of most reasonable people."

She stared at him, a little frightened, missing the true import of his speech, and only seeing it afterwards.

But the fright was only momentary, and when she thought of it, she flushed with a sort of shame as she recognised all the generous preparations he was making for her comfort, and how she had allowed herself, even for a minute or two, to doubt his good faith.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER THE MARRIAGE.

THE Laytons returned to England directly after their marriage. And the blank which follows the excitement of travelling through new scenes of artistic and intellectual delight was modified in Zina's case by the pleasure of settling down in her new home.

Her husband would have proposed a week or two in London, but the season—which, when in its full swing, had that year been distinguished by unusual vitality—was flagging to its close.

The invitations to balls, dinners, routs, races, concerts, and *matinées*, which had hitherto been showered on the tables of the elect, were now becoming beautifully less, and the novelty-craving, pleasure-loving public began as usual to find out that the season had been a failure, and abused the Syren which had charmed them with its infinite variety, and was now beginning to show a hag-like face.

The marriageable daughters who had still to remain unmarried; the dowagers who regretted the money which had been spent on failure; the hosts who had to pay the bills for festive gatherings which had proved unprofitable, and the penniless detrimentals who had been taught to know their proper position, all united in chorus, and found out that the Season had been one of the worst ones ever known.

The bride and bridegroom arrived at that

period of depression, when the flowers in the windowboxes in the best houses of Mayfair and Belgravia were left to droop unwatered, and the striped awnings over the balconies had already been taken down.

The *parterres* in Hyde Park were no longer gay with many colours, but dusty and faded; the grass in Regent's Park was parched and exhausted, and Kensington Gardens were given over to a few pedestrians, groups of children and perambulators.

The marked diminution in smart barouches, glittering Victorias and Morvi carts, in the daily stream of wheeled traffic; and the dearth of riders in the Row announced the fact that the Season was drawing to its close, while everybody was complaining that the heat was stifling.

Delicate complexions were unbecomingly flushed, and Zina—who had always had a dislike to

smart parties though she had tolerated the smaller gatherings at her father's house, and who thought that the atmosphere of the theatres and Italian Opera House would be intolerable—was rejoiced when George Layton acceded to her request, taking her at once to the country house in Surrey, which had been in his family for more than two generations.

“ You will find it dull enough unless you fill it with guests. I have seldom lived in it myself since the old people died, and a lonely bachelor can only amuse himself with grumpy male friends. But we will change all that now,” he said, scarcely heeding her answer when she hastened to declare that a society *à deux* would quite suffice for her.

Zina raved about her new home, with its old-fashioned grounds, its beautiful timber, and—that necessity in a landscape—a piece of ornamental water.

Layton called it a "duck-pond," but the duck-pond was large enough to have a small boat moored on it; there were sedges on its banks, and beautiful reflections in its depths.

The grey towers of the old stone house harmonised well with the trees which surrounded it, and if the grounds were not large the slight assistance of art gave them the appearance of communicating with vast stretches of greensward.

Layton laughed at his wife when she told him that the place realised her day-dreams and fairy visions.

She was in a humour to be pleased, and was equally delighted with the old staircase, the antique balusters, the immense hall, the big drawing-room with large looking-glasses, consoles, marble tables, candelabra, tapestry with cupids and flowers, and handsome paper which formed a background for family portraits.

“The portraits are not ours, and the tapestry is worm-eaten stuff—we are not people who can pride ourselves on our genealogical tree—the whole thing went together, when my grandfather made his fortune in oil, and purchased the place, pretty well half a century ago,” George said with a shrug, “but I never find it necessary to enter into particulars, the less one explains the better, when things are taken for granted.”

It was one of the speeches which jarred on Zina, though it was lightly said. And it jarred on her still more when, on hurrying to the conservatories, finding that they contained the blossoms she loved, and announcing her intention of still studying the luminous textures of the lily-petal, and the sheeny velvet of the rose, he answered indifferently, “I think you have real talent, but you will have something

else to do now; you can buy what pictures you please."

The cynicism reminded her again of her father, who on her return from studying in Rome had told her that he had a particular objection to religious pictures, they were a survival of bygone superstitions. "Whatever else you paint," Stuart Newbolt had said, "may I beg that you will steer clear of Madonnas, and those anatomical monstrosities with wings, called angels."

George Layton was less sweeping in his restrictions.

He could hardly be severe after having raved about Andrea del Sarto and his consummate harmony of manner, in line, colour, and chiaro-oscuro.

Had it not been the picture of Andrea, the faultless, which first attracted him to his wife?

But none the less did he probe her with his cynical stiletto.

Her energy and her small enthusiasms amused him, whilst the look of amusement in his face was perhaps harder to bear than any amount of open sarcasm.

He told her smilingly that she was like a child. For as soon as her boxes were unpacked, and her dress arranged for the autumn (a point on which George was particular) she began to occupy herself with the furniture and the gardens.

But the gardeners were sufficient for the work, which they had been accustomed to do for years, and looked a little askance at the new mistress who ventured to interfere with horticultural details.

She was fond of altering things, and experimenting in improvements, but nothing could

be altered to advantage in the conservatories.

All that she could wish in the way of Gloire de Dijon and Maréchal Niels, Japanese lilies, tuberous begonias, velvety gloxinias, and standard fuchsias--to be varied in the winter-time by camelias and chrysanthemums-- were there in lavish abundance.

She was intending to suggest the cultivation of the *Tropaeolum*, but its wax-like bunches already hung from the roofs, with the newest specimens of clematis, and there were even orchid-houses.

Yet it was vexatious to be obliged to ask the gardeners' leave before she could cut flowers for her dinner-table.

She would have turned her attention, next, to the great kitchen garden where the cauliflowers, the cabbages, the dainty-leaved asparagus, and the big carrots were all wonder-

ful, on account of their luxuriant abundance; but there again the head-gardener had his prerogative.

She had a yearning to be allowed to bring up a few seedlings for herself, but even that could not be allowed for fear of infringing on somebody's province.

It was worse when she tried to remodel the house. The housekeeper had always dreaded the advent of a lady with new-fangled ideas, who would despise her for the constant dustings and polishings which it had been her delight to superintend.

The handsome rose-wood chairs and sofas in the large "droin-room" had been carefully covered up, and the hues of the old-fashioned carpet had been wonderfully preserved by Mrs. Newton's recipe of hiding it with brown holland.

Even house-flies had not been allowed to

desecrate the huge portraits, which—as George so cynically confessed—did not belong to his family, but had been purchased with the whole “plant.”

And Zina decided at last to consign the ladies in mob-caps, ladies with large ruffles, and jovial reckless-looking squires, who smiled at her from the gilded frames which were innocent of a speck of dust, to the tender mercies of Mrs. Newton and the hand-maidens who were constantly employed in their rubbings and scrubbings.

It would have been positively cruel to have arrived at any other conclusion. And the new mistress was only anxious to propitiate the old lady, who had taken her fancy at first, when she looked smiling and respectable as she stood curtseying to receive the bride, dressed in her stiffest black silk gown, and cap with lilac ribbons.

There seemed to be no other method so good as that of leaving her in undisturbed possession of her own domains, and after a while Zina acknowledged that there was little or nothing for a new-comer to improve.

For Mrs. Newton, who had been inclined to be not only worried, but a little patronising at seeing the chairs and tables wheeled into different positions, was generally triumphant when in the end they were wheeled back again into the time-honoured places they had occupied ever since George Layton could remember. And Zina had to content herself with the knowledge that she had furniture enough to play with in the department of which she remained Queen of all she surveyed.

For boudoir, bedroom and dressing-room had been specially ornamented for the bride's appearance by a collection of curiosities, which the

housekeeper in her secret heart sneered at as “gimcracks,” but which her master had been years in amassing from every quarter of the globe.

George had been in the habit of bringing home something unique which had particularly struck his fancy, from each of his foreign journeys. The result, if *bizarre*, was certainly wonderful. For the articles which Mr. Layton had accumulated were of rare value.

When he collected them he had had no idea of preparing for a wife; he had bought them for his own pleasure and warehoused them in an empty room. And the artistic house-decorator to whom he wrote from the Continent, telling him to dispose them to the best advantage in preparing a suite of apartments for a lady, had been a little puzzled how to arrange them.

“I’m most afeared to go into missus’s room

after dark," one of the housemaids had acknowledged.

And her master had laughed when he heard how she thought that them "things on the wall" (meaning some Japanese monsters) would "make a rush at her with their wings."

It had been sufficient that Zina was delighted with the result.

CHAPTER II.

A GILDED CAGE.

So it happened that for a time the large drawing-room was given over to desolation and the domestic ritual of Mrs. Newton.

It would be most suitable, as George remarked, for a ball-room, or theatricals, in which case the furniture could be moved out of the way.

Meanwhile they lived in the second drawing-room,—a sunny room on the west side of the house, which Zina had constantly filled with plants from the conservatories.

And as the autumn came on, the dripping beeches with their yellow leaves looked less dreary from this room.

“I like the view much better—you can not only see the shrubbery, but that bit of the ‘wilderness’ which I love,” said the wife, gazing with affectionate eyes at a belt of intermingled trees where pines and coniferæ gave promise of vigorous growth. “We ought to be very happy here—it is a sort of earthly paradise,” she added with an unconscious sigh.

“Happy here all our lives, with a sort of ‘John Anderson my Jo,’ happiness, going hand in hand together for the next fifty years, to sleep at last in the village churchyard! No, my dear, I should be dog-tired of that sort of happiness, and I fancy that you too would not find it a period of unalloyed bliss,” answered George, laughing heartily.

But the tone of his voice grated on her, and for the first time she took herself to task for not being sufficiently thankful for her freedom from care, and her sudden promotion from anxious, hardworking poverty to an affluence which ought to have made any woman happy.

If George had only given her more of his society, instead of burying himself in his study!

At first she respected his hours of retirement. That stamp of intellect on his face must mean possibilities, some fibres of manly ambition which needed only to be humoured into growth.

It was a little time before she understood that he had tried books as he had tried society, sports, baccarat, politics and travelling, and that all in turn had become flat, and would be flatter than ever if his experiment in married life palled upon him too.

He was a collector of books, retiring to his
II.

library for many hours in the day. But when she followed him into the sanctum she found that he did not study much.

He was a genuine lover of the delicate vellum of the books, and he had several rare editions of which he was amazingly careful; the mere suspicion of grease on a page, or a dog's-ear, or a thumb mark, being a matter of abhorrence to him. If he seldom read his books, he collated them, and had them continually catalogued and rebound; he talked as if he had read all of them in the days of his youth.

In this sanctum he smoked a good deal, once offering her a cigarette. He did so as a matter of habit, and then suddenly pulled himself up, declaring that he had forgotten she was one of the women who occupied a superior platform, and had an objection to the fragrant weed.

In the study, too, he had continual glasses of

brandy or curaçoa, remarking on the dulness of the country, the objectionable dampness of the English climate, and the necessity of taking something to keep out the cold.

When she knocked at the door, he pretended to be deeply engrossed with a book, or occupying himself with newspapers, but after a while she began to have her own suspicions that he spent a good deal of time in sleeping, as well as smoking, or drinking these glasses of curaçoa. It was not complimentary to her society.

She began to fancy that he had a look of discontent or disappointment on his face, but did not as yet suspect that he was missing something to which he had been always accustomed, and that the presence of one woman, although she might be the woman he had selected as his wife, could not altogether compensate for the absence of the numerous women who

adored him, and the men who felt the attraction of his presence.

A companionship *à deux* was not likely to be sufficient for him.

It needed no one to point out to her the mistake of trying to force sentimental situations.

When he did not seem to be anxious for her company she left him, having not the slightest doubt of his real affection for her, and reminding herself that a man did not marry a portionless girl for nothing.

All the same it *was* dull. For, as he did not like her to spend too much time over her painting, there seemed to be nothing else for her to do.

She had come to a pass in life when there was never likely to be anything really important for her to do. It was depressing.

She was energetic enough and English enough

not to feel as if marriage ought to limit her capacities, or put an end to possibilities in the future.

She could not hold to the doll's house theory of existence, or feel as if life had no more in store for her, because she had met the man who was destined to be her husband and married him. Rather was it in accordance with her theory, that the drama of existence should begin, and new vistas of usefulness open for her.

She knew she had no reason for discontent if, after the few first weeks of wedded companionship, her husband did not necessarily remain a lover, for she prided herself on being a reasonable woman, freer from the temptation of making illogical demands on the time and patience of others than most of her sex.

Still in some strange and undefined way

she missed the mystery of the unknown, the delight of indefinite hopes, and in the every-day routine of this countrified domestic life she was conscious of disillusion. The charm of autumn with its varying tints was as beautiful in its way as the charm of the spring, but there was something melancholy, as time went on, in the rainy days and the decaying vegetation.

The rain penetrated the warmest clothing, and as there was not much pleasure in walking over lawns or gravel paths, with tiny waterfalls streaming from one's umbrella, she was driven back into the cosy nest which her husband had prepared for her.

It was cosy enough, and very beautiful; much money had been spent in lining it with down, but it struck her more than once, with a pang at her heart which seemed ungrateful and which she could not exactly comprehend, that George

would have been better pleased if she could have occupied herself altogether with *bibelôts* in the pretty little suite of apartments which he prepared for her, and which was up to the newest lights.

“Oh, how lovely,” she had said when she had seen it first. The art treasures *were* lovely enough, but she could not look at them for ever.

That he should expect her to be happy shut up alone in these rooms and deprived of any special employment gave her the impression that he wanted her to be a superior sort of canary bird, confined in a gilded cage, fed with seed and lumps of sugar, and only allowed to hop about at certain times in the day.

To ramble out even when the weather was bad seemed to her preferable to spending hours in the gilded cage.

But one morning, when her husband met her equipped in waterproof and with campstool

his look of surprise was so great, that she had to say in explanation, "Don't you see how beautiful the mist is? I thought of going out to sketch it."

"I see that it will bring on lumbago or sciatica," he said shrugging his shoulders. "How can you like to be so constantly damp?"

Damping to *him*, he seemed to hint, but she was too disconcerted to laugh at the joke.

CHAPTER III.

TIME FOR REFLECTION.

IN her boudoir she had ample time for reflection. And if the reaction which her husband had perhaps been anxious to bring about did not come all at once, if she did not as yet weary of this solitary country life, though he had more than once railed at its excessive dulness, it was because her energetic mind was putting out fresh feelers after increased occupation. Town pleasures, as she still declared, had very little seduction for her, and even George did

not advocate a move in the autumn months.

“Nobody,” as he said, “would be in London at this season of the year,” the toiling millions who might some day take their revenge on the pampered minority, being still at work in the hive, but ignored as if they did not exist.

“The spring,” as she answered cheerily, “would be the time to enjoy the country,” and as he did not think it necessary to go in for hostile remarks, he did not answer that the spring was the very time for going to Town.

She began to talk about the lambs and the calves, the warbling of the birds, and the coming of primroses, and she noticed that he did not respond.

He did not think it necessary to tell her that there was nothing interesting in lamb unless it were on a dish, that he never thought of noticing the gambols of calves, and that the warblings of

thrushes and blackbirds to their mates were apt to disturb his slumbers in the morning.

He did not even care to talk about his travels.

"I do believe he has seen everything," she said to herself, "from crocodiles to the great sea-serpent itself. You can startle him with nothing."

Even his smile was a trifle *blasé* when she tried to discuss these things with him.

And he had a habit of shutting his eyes as if they were quite worn out with all the pictures of cities and landscapes imprinted on the retina.

In reality he was only waiting to propose a "house-party," having no intention of continuing to live up to the sort of strain which had been forced upon him when it was necessary to secure the woman he loved.

The rebound from intense anxiety before he had succeeded in his attempt was followed by a

flatness which she would be certain to recognise sooner or later. It would only be a matter of time; he waited for her to find it out, and to develop into the fashionable woman who would seek the ordinary modes of enlivening herself.

The staff of servants was more than ample. There was one maid to help her to arrange her various dresses, and another to take continual messages to the stately housekeeper.

She had little to do but to give the servants *carte blanche* to study the tastes of their master.

He was fastidious, and was accustomed to be humoured in his eating and drinking.

After the first month or two this state of things began to weigh upon her conscience.

She remembered the poverty which she herself had endured, and the unevenness which had always struck her in earthly lots.

She could not help reminding herself how

she had determined, if the time ever came when she would not have to earn her own living, never again to give way to idleness, never to be without some great resource, in fact to act much in the same way as if she were still dependent on her own efforts for support.

She had not thought it necessary to tell her husband of the *rôle* which she had marked out for herself, but his remarks about her painting had been a keen disappointment to her. That desire of the artist to collaborate with Nature, being not merely imitative or mimetic, but infusing her own spirit into everything which she painted, had seemed to him a little absurd.

Work ! He had never worked himself and had no sympathy with work ; he wished his wife to be ornamental like other successful women.

He had humoured her, during their short en-

gagement, in a way of speaking about the subject which seemed to him slightly ridiculous, trembling on the verge of the theatrical, but as a husband he no longer considered it necessary to humour her.

“I like—to act—as if I were independent,” she had tried to explain to him more than once, “I cannot imagine myself in a situation in which it would not be right to be industrious—the people who set themselves to do something are always the happiest.”

Something in his voice grated on her as he answered:

“What is the good of doing anything in particular, when in fifty years whatever we do will be sure to be forgotten. There are too many gifted people in the present generation for the gifts of any one person to be of any importance whatever.”

He spoke, as he explained, quite as much of himself as of her, and she began to understand that this was the secret of his constant inertia.

After all it was not uncomplimentary when he further explained that he could not bear to see her wearing herself out in spoiling her pretty eyes and delicate complexion with unnecessary fag.

She was forced to remember that it was he who had made the fag "unnecessary." An out-of-door life was after all very much to her taste, and when the weather became finer with the air cold and clear, there were the resources of riding and driving, and George Layton had no further excuse for shutting himself up in the house.

George was a good rider. Apparently there was nothing of this sort, which he did badly,

but he cared for it no more than he cared for shooting for its own sake; she noticed that he took little interest in his horses or his dogs.

He explained that he thought the riding slow; what was the use of ambling along in dirty lanes which he had seen a thousand times before? He wished his wife to ride well, he even took pains with her riding and taught her how to take her fences; remarking that he did not see what was the use of her sitting straight and riding really well unless she had someone to see her ride.

“I want you to look well in the Row,” he added, and she could not help thinking that he cared most for riding in the Row, or hunting with a party of friends.

To run the risk of being splashed up to one’s neck with no object in view but that of amusing

oneself with one's own wife evidently did not suit him.

He confessed to the fact of caring most for yachting, but this again was not enlivening ; since it proved on enquiry that though it might have been possible for him to keep his own yacht as a bachelor, it was one of the expenses which he would have to curtail as a married man.

He took refuge once more in his sanctum after they had scoured the lanes and moors together. And she comforted herself by thinking that—as he did not care for riding, and was not fond of getting about on his own legs—she could eke out the short days by visits to the cottagers in the neighbourhood.

It was not the first time in her life that she had found herself taking an interest in the opinions, passions, and aspirations of that large

class of her fellow-creatures called the “working class,” and she was delighted when it suddenly occurred to her that the position of a Lady Bountiful still remained for her and would be exactly the right one for her to fill.

There were plenty of people for her to help immediately around her own grounds, and she was astonished beyond measure when she found that George was worried by what he called her “interference.”

He put it to her gently but not the less was she surprised, when he begged her to leave things alone, and not to create an awkwardness for his steward.

“It is quite a mistake to suppose that you will make things any better for Hodge and his wife by sympathising with them and petting them,” he said, scarcely able to hide an anxiety which seemed to her queer and disproportionate.

She could only conclude that any parade of philanthropy was distasteful to him.

“Charity,” he declared, in language more stilted than he was accustomed to use “is the only crime which disguises itself under the aspect of a virtue.”

But Zina had not been injudicious in her charity, and did not like him to hug that fallacy to his soul.

She winced at his words, though he flattered her as usual, and declared that nature had intended her to bloom in an atmosphere of beauty, and that everything which was unpleasant should be kept out of her sight.

“O I don’t understand you, or agree with you at all,” she remonstrated in her turn. “What is the use of selfishly refusing to see anything that is uncomfortable?”

Was it possible, she asked herself, that

living as it were in one plane of existence he was shut out from appreciating the feelings and ideas which went on in the being of others in a somewhat lower state?

She was ready to make any excuse for his fastidiousness, but was determined on this occasion to be brave. He declared that the majority of the cottagers were impostors trading on her kindness, and she angered him by arguing that it was the rich man and not the beggar who was the refuse of society. Her mind had too much time to feed on perplexing social problems, and she began to hate the personal luxuries obtained at the cost of suffering to the animal creation, and to inveigh against a system based on coercion and violence to one's fellows.

“My mother was a flower-girl; she belonged to that ‘separate nation’ which forms the base of the social pyramid; I want to know more

about that nation—the rulers of the future,” she vexed him by explaining with that freedom and frankness which had at first attracted him, but which now seemed to him out of keeping with her position as his wife.

She insisted on having her own way, carrying soup and puddings to the villagers, and even sitting up at night with a woman who had been ill, but his opposition was extreme, and almost violent.

It was the nearest approach to a quarrel which had taken place yet.

“ You educated women are fools, too ready to spoil things by a kindness which is pleasant to yourselves—you call it by fine names—altruism and all the rest of it—but there is something selfish in your determination to be popular with the people—you are hardly to blame for a mistake which is common to the

sex, and I suppose you will end by doing like most of the others, pleasing yourself," he said in the heat of an argument which seemed to her more exaggerated on his side than hers.

"It does not matter whether you call it altruism or selfishness—fine names have nothing to do with it—it pleases me certainly and I like to do it," she answered with a laugh, priding herself on keeping her temper.

Not the less had the iron entered into her soul when she found that all the appeals which she had made to his nobler nature had proved utterly ineffective, and that he had repelled them without remorse and without betraying the slightest sensitiveness to such appeals.

"Is he afraid of my talking to the people; what harm can that do?" she found herself asking in this strange experience of their mutual unfittedness, but she was not inclined to give

way. "Of course, there must be new beginnings to everything—one must accommodate oneself to new conditions," she argued with herself in this beginning of her married life, when first of all it dawned upon her that she and her husband were radically different.

CHAPTER IV.

COUNTRY LIFE.

So the days passed on till curled and brittle leaves were accumulating in the hollows of the hills, and one morning a network of frost was glittering on the bare branches of the trees, making them look like aisles of a Gothic cathedral.

Zina gazed admiringly at the woods in their “white silence,” and she had no longer anything to say in protest when George rubbed his hands together, as they sat down after

breakfast by the fire which had been lit in the smaller drawing-room, remarking:

“I think we shall have an early winter, the frost was severe last night. The right thing is to have a few people at once to cheer us up. By-and-by, when you get used to it, I shall insist on a proper house-party—fill the place with people—and then, when I have drawn out a list, it will be *your* part to set to work to issue the invitations—just at present—as it is early time—we will be content with a few.”

It destroyed her fond idea that during the first few months of married life her sole companionship might suffice for him, and that in the happy interchange of thought they might be all in all to each other. But she rebuked herself for foolish sentimentality. She was not sentimental enough to suppose that

love must be the all-absorbing, all-engrossing passion of a man's life.

On the contrary, she knew that English country life must involve country visiting and had looked forward to the summer when the house might be filled with cultured, refined and pleasant-mannered folks who would take their part in English amusements—lawn-tennis and golf.

But unfortunately the "few people," whom George invited, emphasized the differences which she had begun to discover between herself and him, being mostly male friends who had been the *habitués* of the bachelor's house.

The excuse for inviting men had been on account of the sporting season.

But it turned out that very few of them really cared for hunting, any more than they probably cared for shooting.

There was generally some occasion for giving up adventurous sport, either the settled damp, or the hurricanes of wind, or the condition of the horses, and after a certain amount of ostentatious talk the host and his guests would adjourn to the billiard-room. There was a good deal of joking, but the jokes were not to Zina's taste.

For of what is called the shadier side of life she had seen and known nothing during her previous experience; her father had shielded her from anything disagreeable and she had put it from her as too disgusting to think of.

Her extreme simplicity, and her limited ideas of the wickedness of the world, had sometimes almost roused her husband's laughter, and the laughter was all the louder, as she was not a religious woman, and admitted that the moral

principles on which she prided herself were only registered generalisations from experience.

To escape from some of the visitors whose manners she did not like, she spent much of her time in long rambling walks.

Her husband had complained that the November days were dreary, and that before Christmas-time it would be necessary to invite many more guests.

But the month of November, when the heavy dews lay on lawn, shrubbery, and woodland, when she could watch the ways of the birds, no longer concealed by the foliage, and hear the thrush beneath her window practising *roulades* for the coming spring, did not seem to her dull.

She rejoiced in the cold fresh air, in the delicate veil of gold which still lingered on the elms, or in the oaks in the hollows which yet

retained their russet leaves. She would come home sometimes in triumph with her hands laden with berries or even the latest of wild flowers.

And by degrees she grew accustomed to spending more of her time in the cottage homes of her husband's tenants. For her ideas remained unaltered, she was unable to shake them off; they even gathered force, being unaffected by the world's verdict, the approval and condemnation of others having an irresistible power for her.

Had it been merely a question of wishing to live in retirement, or a selfish turning away from any society but that which was of the highest or most intellectual, she would have acknowledged the truth of Layton's strictures when finding that his significant looks were wasted on her, he said :

"You must cultivate your powers to please charm. I shall and appreciate them all the more when they are not kept for myself—I want my friends to see what a delightful woman I have married." It was awkward for her to explain that his friends were distasteful to her.

But he knew it without explanation by the look of disapproval and surprise which he hated to see in her expressive face.

He could not accuse her of saying much, but that strange secondary consciousness—telling her that all was not as it should be between herself and him—which she tried to keep in the background betrayed itself occasionally in her manner.

She had read somewhere that a wise wife never asked questions, and hitherto she had refrained from asking them.

But matters came to a crisis when she was asked to entertain some women of whose style she did not approve. She determined to appeal to Layton about one of them.

"It is not merely that she is a *divorcée*—it is said that the world is sometimes cruelly hard on divorced women and I should not like to join in the hardness—but there is a fast tone about her which I don't like—she flirts so terribly, and there are all sorts of gossip afloat," she remonstrated with a directness which took him by surprise.

"My dear, you have no more in common with pulseless prudishness than I have myself. Don't go in for prudent propriety," he answered, as if he hoped to amuse her by his alliteration, "but you have a good many fond illusions, and I am afraid you will find some of these illusions rather difficult to keep up.

You must take the world as you find it; I expect you to make things pleasant and not to sit in judgment on your neighbours."

"But supposing the gossip should happen to be true?"

"Surely you can guess what you like, and keep your inferences to yourself—you are generally so quick at comprehending," he said impatiently, and then he dropped the subject.

A pliant wife, as she thought to herself with a strange contraction at her heart, would have made things happier for him, but how was she to gloss over the discrepancy between her ideas and his?

She shrank from the idea of thus "making things pleasant," but still more from the shock of his non comprehension.

For she was an idealist, and when she tried to explain and found that he did not

understand her, she took herself to task. Did he think that she should have kept these feelings veiled? Was his mind too delicate to permit himself to admire a woman whose excessive frankness prompted her to speak out?

Was the fault on *her* side, and was it possible that *his* ideal woman was a being who had a whole region of thoughts and feelings hidden away and not open to discussion?

For though she had begun to have a suspicion of unfitness, the dread had not as yet occurred to her of their not having an inch of common ground between them.

She had to give way, but she did so with an unwonted air of despondency, which made her unusually silent in company.

After a little while, her depression began to weigh upon her husband; he missed her usual

buoyancy her brightness in conversation, and felt it to be necessary to remonstrate with her about it.

He sought her for this purpose in her dressingroom before dinner.

She was brushing out her hair, and he stood for a moment arrested by the beauty of the picture.

The wintry days were very chilly, and the leaping flames from the little fireplace set round with china tiles were bringing out the lights and shadows in her face, shining on the scintillating diamonds on her hands, and on the blue-black masses of the *chevelure* on which she justly prided herself.

A curiously grotesque piece of Japanese embroidery in black and gold which she used for a *portière*, made a suitable background for the picture. It was altogether a

delightful bit of chiaro-oscuro, and he was keenly susceptible to the influence of such sights.

He had come to tell his wife how he resented her present mood, and to laugh her out of her belief in the desperate wickedness of the upper stratum of society, but as he sat down by her side with a lighted vesta and a cigar in his hand, he felt unable to bear the gaze of those limpid eyes, and far more inclined to relapse into his old manner of tender endearment.

“You look like an advertisement for Mrs. Allen’s hairwash,” he said, touching the hair admiringly; “No, it is a charming bit of *genre*—so homelike and natural; I wish you oftener looked like it. I wish,” he added after a pause, “you were more restful, more like other women, and not always in an

unsettled state, speculating on things beyond your power, and then you would be perfect in every respect, ready to put in a frame."

She did not answer. He seemed so utterly unaware of the sort of taunt conveyed in his speech. The moment was unfavourable for explanation.

How could she tell him that much which would have made life worth living for the majority of women had no interest for her; that embroidery seemed to her a waste of time, and attending to household duties merely trivial in a case like her own, where there was so little to do?

"May I light my cigar?" he asked, as she continued silent, and even then she did not think it necessary to tell him that his habit of smoking at all times and seasons, before dinner as well as after it, was a bad habit, and one

which was likely to injure his health sooner or later.

For her husband seemed to have an iron constitution, and never could talk so easily as when under the influence of nicotine.

As he smoked he began to enlarge on the differences between them, his objection to her spoiling the cottagers and letting them gossip to her during their visits, and his desire that she should accommodate herself to the idiosyncrasies of his various guests.

He tried to speak coaxingly:

“We English people look at these things in a different light from the French, and you women are properly prudish,” he said, as he smoked; “but really it is time you should give up a few of these insular prejudices.”

She twisted her hair up with such energy that she tore it—it was a sign of her nervous

impatience. Was it right, she asked herself, to talk so lightly of the barriers between right and wrong?

She felt humbled, degraded that he should speak to her in such a way.

Did he wish her, she wondered vaguely, to be like the women whose complexions could not be approached too nearly without fear of soiling one's lips, and whose reputations equally resembled porcelain?

She asked him the question in her excitement, and was astonished to find that he attempted to rebuke her for what seemed to him the vehemence and narrowness of a child.

“Really, my dear, the world does not need you to set it right—‘this is proper and that is not’—stupid artificial demarcations—it will be neither better nor worse for all your meddling.

Leave Mrs. Grundy to indulge in that sort of hurdy-gurdy grinding. I loathe it."

Something seemed to be falling like a drop of water down her back when he added.

"You make yourself ridiculous and I do not want my friends to laugh at you—it is ridicule which kills."

She did not need his explanatory comment that without forcing herself to say what was absolutely untrue, it would be easy for her to cultivate the manner of most society women, the manner, he went on to explain though he was visibly a little embarrassed, of gliding over tender places and making oneself agreeable without sense of friction.

Again it struck her that though she had never prided herself on any remarkable goodness, he was evidently impatient with the stupidity of good women, and that his enthu-

siasm was not for goodness which he treated as if it were an attribute of the lower middle-class.

“ You must not get into the way of taking your ideas from Mrs. Carruthers who writes for shop-girls,” he said a little sneeringly.

“ Right principles are not to be mocked at,” she answered as she looked at him with flashing eyes.

And then she broke off in her speech. For, with a short “ Oh, don’t let us talk nonsense!” and a hurried glance at the Louis Quinze clock, he got up and left her.

CHAPTER V.

BREAKING TO HARNESS.

IT was Layton's way of breaking her to harness; he was ready to take a good deal of trouble to this desirable end; he did not see why he should be displeased; in fact he was in good spirits, hoping that his difficulties would disappear by degrees. For he had not been able to hide from himself for some time past the fact that difficulties existed.

Had he not been too much in love to allow himself to weigh the matter seriously, he

might have had doubts from the beginning as to whether this woman would make him the suitable, yielding wife with whom alone he could be happy.

He now saw that when the hindrances to attainment had been greater than he had expected he had flung prudence to the winds, after the manner of a man who was not accustomed to be thwarted when he set his mind on anything.

But he was not to be disconcerted. He comforted himself with the thought that already he had inserted the thin edge of the wedge, and by degrees he hoped to wean Zina from some of her queer ways of thinking.

“Half a loaf,” as he reminded himself, “was better than no bread”, when a whole loaf could not be secured, and though he listened to some of his wife’s sentiments with very

mixed feelings, he had confidence in his own power, and hoped to win her in time to become the submissive, amiable woman with whom he could glide easily through existence.

It was inconsistent; he was aware of the inconsistency.

It was the down-rightedness of this woman which had fascinated him at first, and her high modes of thought, and now—having transplanted her to another soil—he was doing his best to assimilate her to an easily recognised type.

But George Layton had never prided himself on his consistency. He misinterpreted Emerson's saying—that the many-sided man has nothing to do with consistency.

On her part, she was ready to take herself to task. How was it that she had never noticed the serious discrepancies between his thoughts and her own?

She remembered that she had made trifling confidences during their short engagement, but that the confidences had been all on one side; he had said little or nothing about his own former life.

She had noticed, too, that when she led the conversation into graver topics he had steered gently away from them, and began again to talk about concerts or theatres. How was she to make him understand that though her ideas on religion were all unsettled, she was yet not without her higher aspirations?

His good spirits quickly flagged, and after this, whenever they were again in *tête-à-tête*, it was his turn to be languid.

It was difficult to suppose that he had any cause for anxiety, and yet the lines had deepened on his brows, and a look of satiety, which she had shrunk from once before, haunted

her again like a ghastly unreality as it reappeared on his face.

“Do you know you are not at all amusing to-night?” he said suddenly to her one evening, when between the coming and going of visitors there were fewer people than usual in the house.

Was it another ghastly fancy which brought back to her the memory of Louis XV. and Madame de Pompadour, who had always to amuse him? The Sèvres china, the wrought-iron work, and the other *chiffons* in her beautiful drawing-room palled on her in connection with that fancy.

The coldness which had come between them, and the sudden change in their mutual positions were very enigmatical to her; but, then, there was something curious in her husband’s smile, even when he spoke to her

with a tenderness that was now unwonted in his voice, which was enigmatical altogether. It produced a sensation which she could hardly explain to herself.

Could it be possible that he was selfish, as someone had told her, with a selfishness which was impregnable, and wilfully blind to the rights of others?

If it were so, it could not be necessary for her to let him know that she was acquainted with this cardinal defect in his sex; neither did she think it worth while to make too much of this question, but answered it lightly, saying that she could not pretend to talk in epigrams, or to drop a joke into every sentence, as in the brilliant dialogue of some of our modern plays.

Nevertheless she did her best to amuse him, while she was aware that she was entrenching

herself in one of the worst forms of reserve, her deepest feelings being hidden away, and religiously preserved from the vulgarity of speech.

It was possible, as she argued with herself, that this reserve might be the only means of preserving perfect peace between a man and a woman who looked at certain questions from different standpoints, and whose duty it was mutually to give in to one another.

There were things which her husband ought to have understood without forcing her to speak of them, and she had discovered by this time that even if she could oblige herself to speak of them, he would assume the superior position of the man and treat them as of no importance.

Not the less was she bitterly disappointed, and there were days when the throbbing of

the excited heart, and the horror of the something invisible and intangible, which was interposing between them, was almost more than she could bear.

She was glad of any trivial subject which did not need to be tabooed. There seemed to be no reason to be silent about them to Layton. Yet he was a man who so evidently liked things to be comfortable and pleasant all round that she was vexed with herself for not hiding the truth from him when one day, having ventured a little further than usual, in one of her lonely rambles, she had stones thrown at her, evidently aimed from one of the cottages.

“One would think that there was something in my appearance to inspire feelings of hatred,” she said, shewing her delicate wrist which had been slightly grazed by one of

these missiles. "If I could only have explained that I intended them nothing but good; but an old woman who cursed me shut the door in my face."

"Did I not tell you I had good reasons for wishing you not to interfere with these savages?"

"One would think there was some mystery. — What is there to hide?" she asked with mixed feelings. "Surely anything would be better than surreptitious doings on my part, and seeing that I think it better to visit some of our poor people—would you not have me tell you honestly of my intentions?"

But he only answered her, "no good ever comes from meddling with these people, and trying to annihilate class distinctions," speaking more sternly than he had ever spoken to her as yet; whilts she—overwhelmed by the

shock of her recent discovery—occupied herself with winding a handkerchief round her injured wrist, and declaring that nothing in the world was the matter with it, and that in fact her feelings were a good deal more hurt at finding that her attempts to help people met with so rough a response.

“All the more reason for persevering. I was never conquered by anything of that sort,” she added in a cheery voice. “If the people are as bad as that, they must be very wretched—and I cannot bear to think of anyone being unhappy,” whilst Layton muttered something to himself about its being hard that the even tenour of a man’s life should be interrupted by such childishness.

He did not speak his thoughts aloud; he thought it more diplomatic to render his wife’s duties as *châtelaine*, more onerous than be-

fore by inviting other friends. This time there was no intermission; she seemed to have brought it on herself.

There was first one circle of guests in the varied house-party, then another and another, and by degrees it became second nature for Mrs. Layton to perform the part of hostess, always graciously if sometimes a little languidly, in what was for her a new treadmill of life.

Amongst those who had promised to visit them during the winter, coming soon after Christmas, and remaining till the spring, was Eva Capern, and Eva prided herself on her capability for keeping other people amused.

Mrs. Capern of course had not stood still; she had developed a good deal according to that law of nature which involves either deterioration or improvement.

It was almost impossible to think of her now as the delicate and fragile woman with large rounded eyes who had never struck a jarring note at Stuart Newbolt's entertainments.

She had then been always dressed in the height of the fashion, just as she prided herself on being the “smartest” woman present now.

But *then* she had spoken in hushed tones, retailing the scraps of information which she had picked up in her reading from newspapers and reviews and had managed to satisfy her guardian's fastidious taste, though she had enjoyed life in a different fashion from that in which she enjoyed it at present.

She was not only rather weary of playing at invalidism, but circumstances had happened which made it necessary for her to secure a *pied à terre* in the house of another woman who—though not a blood-relation—was the

nearest connection she had in the world.

Her husband—who had indulged her in every caprice, and had quietly acquiesced to being left in solitude whilst his wife went about to various places enjoying herself—had amused himself during her absence by indulging in ruinous speculations.

His losses of money obliged Eva to exert herself, and she determined to do her best to “keep in” with the Laytons.

The two women had always jarred on each other, and they would continue to do so wherever they met.

The selfish, common-place, pleasure-seeking, manœuvering nature would always clash with the other which knew nothing of low motives, or petty self-seeking, and which would at any time be ready to wreck its own happiness for the sake of doing right.

But Mrs. Capern knew that however Zina might wince at her ill-timed observations, she would never refuse an asylum to her. It might be different with the husband—a man easy to offend: and therefore Eva determined in the playing of her cards to be always on the alert to propitiate Mr. Layton, and if need be to fight his battles.

Her way of trying to “keep in” with both had occasionally the effect of making Zina wince. She no longer spoke in the languid tones which had been a part of her invalidism, but in an unnecessarily loud voice, indulging in bursts of laughter and sallies of merriment often at the expense of her hostess.

“There was a good deal to laugh at,” Zina willingly admitted, though she wished that Mrs. Capern would not make quite so much of her intimate friendship with herself, or give

her opinion so decidedly about her domestic affairs.

“Fancy sitting in a garden-chair and surveying the view. A nice way of amusing oneself,” jeered Eva “a life fit for a cow; that seems to be about what you were reduced to before we came to cheer you up.”

“I thought Mr. Layton was always so fond of country life; at least I always understood so before we were married,” answered Zina, somewhat coldly.

“Country life is a very different thing to country-*house* life, my dear,” corrected Mrs. Capern, “and his bachelor house-parties used to be varied by London—why he never missed a season in London. He has always been accustomed to be the centrepiece of an admiring circle of people, and you can’t expect sterling silver for a centrepiece. You’ll

learn like most of us to be content with the best electro-plate."

There was not only reproach in the clear eyes with which Zina looked at the woman who had been brought up in such intimate companionship with herself that she could venture to say things which no one else would have dared to say, but a sudden light came into them as if some recollection had been roused in her mind.

"If you knew all this"—she began, and then checked herself as if in loyalty the subject could not be discussed.

Eva was a little startled, a little remorseful, and yet touched almost humourously by the unspeakable things in Zina's face.

"As if I ever intended her to put such ridiculous faith in every word I told her!" she said in an aside to herself, and then

rattled on to hide any possible uncomfortableness,—

“I don’t see why you should insist on putting that unfortunate husband of yours on a pedestal against his will. He would be the last man to wish it. Most husbands and wives *do* step off their pedestals directly they are married—you see it would be such a bore to keep that sort of thing up,” and she gave a short laugh—“my dear, I am afraid I am quite hardened, I have no pity for people who make troubles about their lives which don’t exist.”

“You may be certain *I* make none, and that if I did I would come to no one about it,” answered Zina with all her old pride.

And again Mrs. Capern almost regretted her interference when she saw that flash in the eyes and that contraction of the lips.

CHAPTER VI.

ZINA EXERTS HERSELF.

ZINA did not need Mrs. Capern's interference to tell her that if she had to get into a new groove, the sooner she adapted herself to it the better.

"I wouldn't funk it if I were you," Eva would have added in the slangy talk which she could affect when it suited her purpose and with her loudest laugh; if the slightest encouragement had been given her.

Meanwhile though it would have been well

if the subject could have been tabooed between them, yet there were still covert hints which possibly had the effect of leading the hostess to exert herself.

Whenever she saw that a lack of animation was vexatious to her husband she made an effort to laugh and talk.

She taxed her ingenuity to amuse the old as well as the young. Had it been summer-time she could have managed to extract diversion for her guests from all sorts of *al fresco* entertainments; but as the weather still remained churlish and capricious she exerted all her forethought and talent for organisation in devising different fashions of indoor amusement.

Dancing in the evenings, cards, and *tableaux vivants* were amongst the new forms of recreation suggested by Eva. An atmosphere

of the man-milliner and the *friseur* seemed to pervade the house.

The staircases and landings were littered with endless bandboxes and parcels. And Zina, who was half dazed by the new calls which were made upon her energy, tried to enter upon the changed state of things with a return of those bright spirits which might help her temporarily to forget any fancied inconveniences.

She herself superintended the decoration of the big drawing-room, now utilised as a ball-room, with palms and ferns from the conservatories as well as suitable flowers, and stifled her objection to the two or three men whose incomes required a little padding, and who were evidently not averse to winning money at cards.

And the suggestion of *tableaux* really pleased her.

It woke the artist in her; she was soon in

her element in planning scenes from history and heaping up all the old brocades, satins, and laces to be found in the old wardrobes.

A stage was erected in the ball-room, where she superintended the arrangements of the *tableaux* which her admirers declared to be "not copied, you know, but pictures original with herself."

The *tableaux* were a success, and a murmur of admiration greeted each fresh creation, overwhelming the spectators with Mrs. Layton's wealth of resource and knowledge of artistic costume. But the hostess had scarcely a breathing space. Not only was there no more time for visiting her husband's tenants, but no more time for exchanging observations with George Layton himself.

It did not occur to her to suspect that she was carrying out a programme which had

been arranged for a purpose; but as she was not a good hand at trying to seem happy on the surface, her jests were sometimes forced, and her manner almost reckless.

“It would be all very well if human life were a ballet set to frivolous music, or if I could choose the friends I like,” she acknowledged to Eva.

“My dear, you would not have it a fight. Each struggles for his own, and slays his fellows in this world of ours; you must choose one or the other—choose the ballet,” answered that lady with a burst of silvery laughter.

“It may seem all right to you,” Zina answered a little slowly, “but you know our opinions differ.”

And when pressed for an explanation she felt half remorseful at having to hint that she did not like Mrs. Meredith, in the absence of

her husband, to be looking such unutterable things at Mr. Dalton. It might be all very well in her character of Lucy in that *tableau* of Ravenswood, but why should she continue to look them after the *tableau* was over?

"What else would you have her look?" cried Eva with a burst of laughter. "Half the married women in the world would be glad of paying off a score on their absent husbands—if they could comfort themselves that the husbands cared a rap."

And then Zina wondered if Mrs. Capern had been consulting with George (for the two had become greater friends than they ever were on the Continent) when Eva added beneath her breath:

"I would keep those objections to myself if I were you. You must have learnt to talk in that way from living with Mary Carruthers.

It is all very well for *her* and for the people she mixes with—but, to tell you the truth, it sounds fearfully—middleclass."

"That is a new fling which has not much meaning, unless it means that there is a break-water—very useful in this country," said Zina, holding her own as she had held it in past times against Mrs. Capern.

It was scarcely worth while to ask Eva what she meant, still less to take her seriously and to remind her of the eternal difference between what is lovely and what is not.

Zina's smile was enigmatical, for what would have been the use of discussing Mary Carruthers with a woman like Mrs. Capern or defending herself for her own fastidiousness of character?

She only said to herself, "There will always be different sorts of society, but certainly my father—who brought Eva up—would not have

agreed with her in caring for the sort which pleases her."

After this there was no more use in protesting against any arrangement; it only involved a loss of time.

"Well—I had marked a few names which I thought we could leave out," she had ventured once before to say to George, who did not apparently see the marks in the list of people to be invited. But now she never ventured on an opinion. "Where are your notions of hospitality? Consider it settled," he would say if she attempted a protest.

After all Eva's philosophy might be true—that the majority of husbands appeared to adapt themselves to the tastes of the women they were courting *before* marriage, and afterwards came the wife's turn; *she* had to adapt herself.

Mrs. Capern said all this in a general sort

of way, arching her pretty brows sarcastically.

“And the sooner one adapts oneself to the changes in society the better. For we are changing nearly everything,” explained the voluble woman, who could chatter more glibly about the freaks of Dame Society than about the works of art at Florence or Venice—“few married women are such prudes as they used to be.”

“Are they not? If you mean that most wise women are sceptical about nine-tenths of the scandals they hear of in what you call society, I should say so much the better.”

“And as to yourself, foolish girl, you ought to be more than content; your husband is never jealous of you, of your popularity, or of the men who admire you.”

To herself Eva added, “I believe she thinks she is really exposing herself to contamination in his set.”

And then aloud, "My dear, it is preposterous that a woman should pretend to mix in society and have such ideas as you have. I am an old and staunch friend," she added with silvery laughter, "and I can give you some good advice. If women are the conquerors of the conquerors of the soil they ought to know how to keep a man's heart when they have conquered it. Humour a man in all his tastes. Give him a good dinner, a little sauce in the way of flattery; let him choose his own society just as he likes, and that is the high road to managing him completely."

"If women are the conquerors of the conquerors of the soil they ought to exercise their power for the best," Zina said, a little conscious of appearing to disadvantage, as she felt the impossibility of entering into details about her private affairs with her father's ward.

To tell Eva or any other woman of her own opinion that when the high ideals were lost, marriage relapsed into a mere commercial treaty, or to lift the veil from the sanctity of home would have seemed to her an offence which nothing could condone.

"It is perfection to which we must aspire, though we cannot hope to reach the ideal," she still said to herself, outraged more than she cared to shew, when Eva—who had installed herself in the house, with the knowledge that Mr. Capern was comfortably out of the way—taking advantage of the position of patronage in which she had formerly been placed, answered with a laugh which irritated her:

"Is it possible you do not really know that men are all the better for sowing their wild oats?"

For though Mrs. Capern seldom attempted to realise the feelings and thoughts of others, she loved a dainty bit of scandal if that scandal did not become tragic.

Her curiosity knew no bounds now that she no longer suffered from delicate health, and her sharp wits had already ferreted out the fact of the something mysterious and uncomfortable which necessitated the presence of so many guests in the house.

To her chums she was far more plain-spoken than she ventured to be with Zina.

“Why the wife’s an innocent,” she wrote to one of her gossips. “He keeps her here and pretends to give way to her objection to living in London, and surrounds her with a set of people who play into his hands, whilst all the time she is afraid about him and tries to keep up the pretty little fiction that he is

a piece of perfection, and we laugh in our sleeves because the man's character is well known, and if she were not a perfect innocent she would not spend a day in London society without knowing the sort of character he bears.

“ You may tell me that perhaps I ought to have inquired into all this when we met him on the Continent, but first of all I was too delicate in health and Zina was quite old enough to understand her own affairs, and next he is perfectly charming to me and as estimable morally as lots of other people, and it is never my way to make such a fuss about trifles.

“ To tell the truth I had a letter from Dick, which I thought it well not to shew her.

“ Why you know under any circumstances when each has such strongly marked idiosyn-

crasies their wills would be sure to clash. But ordinary human nature is not enough for Zina.

“It was only the other day I heard her declare she would never have married a man who had once sown his wild oats—not unless he had repented—and George Layton is not the sort of man to repent.”

Zina knew next to nothing of the gossip which was going on.

She resented Eva’s speeches which were intended for hits, and told herself that they were wide of the mark, stiffening into stone when that officious lady volunteered her good advice. But none the less was she conscious that her husband’s mood was no longer auspicious, whilst he too was aware of a sort of personal removal from him conveyed in her speech, and her manner which had cooled.

If a suspicion of him occurred to her she tried to cloak it from herself, to hide it in innumerable folds; but she might have known by the dull aching at her heart that it was always there.

Had she been happier the company in the house might have ministered to her sense of humour. There were match-making mothers who bungled terribly and showed their hands, old ladies who squabbled furtively over their cards, and for the first time—sporting men who thought of nothing but foxes.

But she began to feel as if she were always on the rack.

The luxurious afternoon teas with the introduction, which she was unable to prevent, not only of champagne but of numerous brandies and sodas, and cigarettes for both sexes, fretted her with an odd sense of her new house-keeping responsibilities; and when she found that she was obliged

to order larks, and *pâté-de-foie-gras* (two luxuries which she had tabooed on the score of cruelty) to vary the *menus* for dinner, her irritation increased.

George insisted on both and she had to give way, as she had to give way about the smoking. They were but little things, but little things which gave a clue to the tone of the guests.

“ Michelet, my dear, declared in vain that tobacco drew the line between men and women. A pretty woman never looks so well as with a cigarette between her lips—we are coming to the days when the cigarette will take the place of the fan in flirtation,” laughed George, when she remonstrated till, ashamed of her scruples, she ceased protesting.

But it would have been so much pleasanter if George had been poor—oh, how she sympathised with Tennyson’s heroine!

If George were only a landscape painter, or if his collars and cuffs had been jagged and his coat the worse for wear, she would have liked him better.

But his excessive care for his personal appearance began to be revolting, and she would have liked it better had they fed on lentil soup, milk and porridge, or bread and cheese, than on the various courses of luxurious food which she was expected to order twice every day for luncheon and dinner.

She was perpetually hoodwinking her conscience when it reminded her of how low she had fallen from her exalted ideal.

The woman who was a *divorcée* and an inveterate flirt still starred it in her drawing-rooms looking to good advantage with porcelain complexion, *bandeaux à la vierge* and pretty frocks of turquoise-blue, or delicate Nile-green.

And Zina had not only become used to giving up her love of retirement and constantly living in a world of brilliant lights, smart dresses and white shirt-fronts, but she had learnt to listen to Eva's fibs, without contradicting them.

How ridiculous, as Mrs. Capern had tried to explain to her, to refuse to avail oneself of that temporary insincerity without which it would be impossible for the world to get on.

“Ah I knew you would recognise it sooner or later,” said Eva laughing. “A woman must have a weapon of that kind; a little pocket-pistol carried for self-protection.”

“It is vanity,” she said on another occasion, “which makes the world go round. I knew that sooner or later you would have to give in to it, like the rest of us.”

After that Mrs. Layton kept her own counsel.

She did not confide to Eva that she felt somehow as if drops of ink had fallen on the white ermine of her life and stained it.

Now and then there was time to reflect when she retired into the privacy of her own boudoir, in which the resources of modern science had been so skilfully combined with mediæval art to minister to her comfort.

Tears came into her eyes when she remembered how her husband had done his utmost to make this retreat beautiful.

The soft radiance of electric light, shaded by coloured glasses, was shed upon alabaster and ivory which had been brought from Italy, the workmanship of which was said to have been superintended by Canova.

A marble figure copied from one of Thorwaldsen's designs stood on a porphyry pillar surrounded by flowering plants.

The hotwater pipes which warmed the apartment whenever it was damp or cold were carefully concealed beneath drapery, and on the walls were pieces of tapestry collected also in foreign travel, in which all things pretty and round, from pomegranates to cupids and apples, were spread as a feast before the eyes.

Some brocade curtains, ornamented with heavy old gold fringes and standing on end with richness—as our grandmothers' dresses were said to stand alone when our manufacturers thought more about beauty and durability than variety; an ebony table with a casket from Ghent in which the delicately carved doors closed on a beautifully painted copy of the quaint Madonna by Van Eyck.

Strange animals from Japan, and idols from India, with the sphinxlike figures and writhing,

mystic forms by which half-cultured nations have endeavoured to solve the riddle of this painful Earth, were all here.

So were carvings of ebony, and sandal-wood, *jardinières* of Satsuma, *faïence plaques*, beautiful stuffs from the looms of Persia, gleaming embroideries from the East, Sèvres and Dresden china with Salviati glasses from Venice.

It was as much of a museum or curiosity-shop as a boudoir, and yet the whole formed an interior of luxury and beauty such as few women could afford to indulge in.

But George had showered luxury upon her; he had given her all this, like the diamonds upon her fingers and the bracelets upon her arms.

She did not undervalue his gifts, but she felt crushed, like Tarpeia, beneath the weight of them, and there were hours when all these

marvels of artistic and modern civilisation filled her with a sort of dread which might at any moment turn to loathing. She detested some of the men and women with whom he was forcing her to associate—the light tone of their talk, their jests and their laughter—and asked herself if the love of beauty might not be used to conceal the microbes of moral disease which were tainting the atmosphere. Semiramis—Cleopatra—Nero—had they not all loved beauty?

The first winter of her married life had scarcely passed, and she was still anticipating the coming Easter, when she privately hoped that many of her London guests, Mrs. Capern amongst them, would be flitting home to prepare for their usual gaieties and she might look forward to having her husband once more to herself.

But already she was beginning to discover that he who surrounded her with these objects of *vertu* was equally fastidious about the appearance of his wife.

Her morning dresses, made in such a style as to imitate the flowing drapery of the Greeks, with her hair coiled round her head, and her embroidered slippers, had to be as elaborately studied as her evening costumes.

And whether or not there was any bitterness rankling in her heart she had to study her toilette carefully and go down elaborately dressed at the sound of the dinner-gong. She had married a critic of woman's beauty as well as of the decorative beauty of his house, one who rallied her when she was grave on the severity of her outlines, and told her to beware lest her features should grow hard when she was an old woman.

The knowledge that he would no longer care for her when she ceased to give pleasure to his eyes did not make her wince; it roused, on the contrary, the spirit of indignation, and she was ready with a new antagonism to flout the beauty which ministered to the meaner part of him.

She would have given all that she now possessed for one sign of the pure affection in which she had believed in the past, but she refused to minister to his vanity by taking greater pains with her self-adornment.

“By Jove, if you don’t take care, you will soon be growing old!” he said one day, when the morning light fell full on her anxious face.

She was not a child to complain of receiving a cold douche, but felt that he could have made his disparaging remark in a manner less chilling. She raised her eyes to his inquiringly.

With those speaking eyes of hers she had

asked a thousand wild questions which her lips could never have framed during these last few weeks of their suspended intercourse—questions about things indefinite and intangible which could never have been put into words.

She was ready herself to admit how they might be the veriest light thistle-down of a woman's imagination. But now she spoke on the impulse of the moment, and regretted her speech, directly it was uttered.

“Is it true,” she panted out, looking at him with those dilated eyes, “that you are a man soon weary of the best one woman can give you? Is it true,” she continued, lowering her voice, “that you did not mean to marry me till you were forced by circumstances? Was the suggestion contained in that letter correct—after all? Answer me—my life depends on the answer.”

But he put her off with an evasion. "What nonsense is this; we have been married too long to make any pretence at getting up a scene, like a pair of quarrelsome lovers. Women are so fond of these comedies of errors," he said, taking the initiative.

He prided himself on the cleverness of his skilfully-worded retort.

Why should he have the comfort of his house destroyed by this sort of jealousy? he asked himself; he was a man of the world, he had never pretended to be anything else, and must protect himself against such questions, and against the discussion of hackneyed subjects.

He had little or no suspicion of her mental torture, and still less of her growing disgusted when she declared to herself that perhaps he had won her by a lie—and that the whole of their married life was possibly based on a

hideous falsehood—a gross deception—one which he might have known from the beginning that she would be certain to find out sooner or later.

CHAPTER VII.

DISILLUSION.

THE next few days were passed by Zina in a state of nervous excitement, in which she would hardly allow herself time to think, so as to realise the torture which her heart was undergoing.

She was afraid of any more sudden scenes in which she might ask unwise questions, and willing to accuse her own temper rather than be ready to suppose that her husband could purposely have left her to infer that a suspicion

was correct which would have altered their mutual relations so thoroughly.

“He could not have been in earnest,” she said to herself on the following morning, “he merely meant me to understand that the question was a painful one, and he refused to discuss it. His irony was open; he took no steps to conceal it; I was a fool to suppose he could have been in earnest. My character is, perhaps, after all, a little too much inclined to suspicion.”

She made up her mind once again not to be a drag upon him, but to try to see things a little more from his point of view, lest everything should be wrecked between them.

“A man so universally admired, and so brilliant as he is, can afford to admit bitter things against himself; perhaps he wanted to see how much I, in my mad passion, could believe,” she said, taking herself to task, as once more she took

her place at the dinner-table, doing her best to look radiant and smiling amongst the people who surrounded her—time having made her a better adept in trying to manage to look happy when appearances were deceitful.

The habit of studying other people, and treating them as if they were things apart from herself helped her in this, and she was learning by degrees, amongst Layton's friends, not to let her standard be too high or exacting, dimly comprehending, and yet not making open strictures.

She went so far as to be vexed with herself for her unresponsive manner, trying hard to rouse herself and spare her husband disappointment.

Had not George been very good to her, and did he not deserve all the social successes which might come to him through her?

If some of the women to whom he introduced her were a little difficult for her to get on with, there were others whom she liked, and she determined to continue to do her best for the entertainment of all, telling herself that quick compliance with George Layton's wishes would be the only way in which she could remedy the new differences between them.

It was only one who knew her well, like Eva Capern, who could be struck by her pallor, and the occasional, reproachful look in her pure, proud face, or who would be likely to notice that the eyes which were so large and full of light would be now sometimes dimmed in a strange way; missing in them—as George Layton had missed—the brightness, the spontaneous pleasure in life, which during the time of her sojourn abroad had been characteristic.

It was not likely to trouble Eva, as it had

troubled George Layton, that her hostess and rival was perceptibly aging, but she did not wish matters to come to a crisis between Layton and his wife.

It was too pleasant a house to visit at, and she watched matters a little anxiously, having wit enough to know that she had already jarred on Zina, to whom she had never proved an agreeable or appreciative companion, and that she could not interpose any more without infringing the laws of hospitality.

Meanwhile, Zina pursued her programme of meeting her husband without uttering a word of reproach.

She wished to meet him as if there were no bone to pick between them, and Eva—who watched her intently—found little excuse for uttering with a scornful laugh:

“What a goose she is!” For “Zina *was*

a goose, there was no doubt of it," the woman of the world had long ago decided—a fool, with her fine ideals and her standards of propriety—but it was evident to her that, however these ideals might be shattered, the "fool" was determined to keep up appearances before other people.

It seemed as if all might have gone well, but that on one evening, on her return from a stroll in the garden, Zina, as she came up the terraced steps, was attracted by the sound of voices in the entrance-hall.

"Be off with you! I tell you the master is busy and cannot be disturbed," said the man-servant, whose tones were raised harshly and gruffly.

Zina stood listening in surprise, with the door ajar so that she could not be seen, and found to her consternation that the insolent

words were addressed to a girl who looked almost like a lady, though her little cashmere dress was shabby, and of a faded hue.

The figure was small and youthful, and the poise of the head on the neck was graceful, while the expression of the little pale face was appealing and sad.

The child—for she was not more than fifteen—had evidently a faithful woman's heart in her slight and half-starved body. She said something in a low voice which she did not finish, for Zina stepped forward and rebuked the man for his rudeness.

Anything like oppression to helpless children or innocent animals had always roused her indignation, and the man stood cowering before her as—with her usually pale face glowing with passion, and her arm extended as if to enforce attention—she poured forth her generous,

indignant words, telling him that if he ever ventured to insult a young lady again he should be dismissed within the hour from service in her house.

The man muttered something which she did not hear, and slunk off like a beaten dog rather than face again the fire in her eyes, and then she turned round to look for the child.

But to her amazement the girl had fled. The slight figure with faded skirt, and narrow hips, which were rather suggestive of a boy than a girl, could just be seen flying round the corner, where a plantation of laurels hid her from view.

Zina's first thought was to hasten in pursuit of her and apologise for the way in which she had been treated; her second to go to her husband and inform him of the circumstances.

He was in his study, sitting in a somewhat dejected attitude, leaning his face upon his hand. In her state of agitation Zina entered the room hastily, forgetting to knock as usual, and he started up when he found her standing by his side.

“How did you come in?” he asked abruptly. And she answered as laconically, “By the door.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

It was not an opportune moment. Her husband was evidently occupied, and it was perhaps natural that he should be vexed when she burst in upon him. Something in her panting excitement which did not seem to him “good form” had evidently jarred upon him.

It was inconsistent with the dignity which he had always admired in her. She might be icy in her manner and in her dealings with

his pet associates, but he had always told himself in his secret heart that the manner in itself was superb. He did not admire the change in it, and he himself was suffering. A look of anxiety, almost of desperation, was on his face.

It was with an evident effort that he roused himself even to speak to her.

But neither fear nor expediency counted for anything in her great excitement, as she—misinterpreting his vexation, and nettled that he should so little have appreciated the efforts she had made to please him, crediting him with the best—said again “Let me remind you that I have a right to come. I trust my coming does not annoy you. Who should tell you, if I did not, when things go on wrongly in this household?” And then in a breathless and agitated way she poured out the story of the footman’s insolence.

"I have come to you because I expect you to back me up in our own house," she said, unconsciously clenching her hand, "I am sure you will feel as strongly as I feel myself that a man who speaks rudely to an innocent girl insults *me* in the person of one of my own sex."

There was silence for a space of time which was in reality short, but which seemed to her long, counted by the beatings of her heart.

He had turned slightly away from her as if all his attention were concentrated on watching a bar of sunshine which at this time of the afternoon fell aslant the dark evergreens near the window, looking as if the sunbeams were cast of solid gold.

She wondered, after a minute had elapsed, if he had heard her, or if she had offended him by her expressive gesture. And then, for the first time, she began to be frightened at the

way in which his brows drew together, describing a thick, black ridge over his sullen eyes.

He was not handsome so; he was positively alarming; and yet only a little while ago she had called herself a brave woman, and had imagined that she could never be terrified at anything. Only that little while ago she could have wounded herself, like Cæsar's wife, to prove her love and gratitude for this man.

A dagger would have had no terror for her, but this new sort of intentness, with which he gazed at her as if he were meditating his answer and intended to frighten her, deprived her of her boasted valour.

A presentiment of coming evil made her silent in her turn.

At last he said:

“Pardon me for answering you in your own

coin—We look at these things from different standpoints—can there be any good in discussing them? And let me remind *you* when you talk about rights, that *I* also have a right to my own individuality. The man Matthews acted by my orders, and I have my reasons for those orders—reasons which I do not think necessary to explain, even to my wife."

She remained staring at him—jeering at herself as she had tried to jeer at herself lately for the foolish presentiments of her own heated imagination.

"I believe in the rights of man. Do you call that heresy, or philosophical theology?" he asked in the light tone of banter to which she was becoming accustomed, as she was to the scornful curl of his lip. "You believe also in the rights of woman? Well and good, but the one set of rights cannot supersede the other;

you must promise me not to interfere with my affairs."

Her heart ached very painfully as she had to be content with this answer, but she resented the thought that there was a mystery behind—what should her husband have to do with mysteries? A secret kept from her by the man whom she trusted would be the one offence she would find it difficult to forgive.

While she confided in him fully and freely, she felt that she ought to expect the same confidences in return. Expect? Was it likely she would have them? Was not this the second time he had not only withheld his confidence, but left her baffled and sick at heart, to infer the worst from his ominous silence.

"It is only to try me. Oh! I feel quite sure it *must* be only to try me," she thought a few hours afterwards as she dressed for dinner, doing

her best to repress the great tide of indignation which was swelling in her breast.

She had given orders to her maid not to come to her that evening, but her heart beat suddenly faster as she heard the sound of a light knock at the door of her dressing-room, and a letter was put into her hands by the girl, who said in a whisper:

“Matthews says he didn’t venture to keep it back, but the master would be that angry if he happened to know about it.”

Zina felt almost guilty as she took the letter. It was in a childish handwriting and written evidently with difficulty:—“Lady, My sister is dying. It is at the same cottage where the stones were thrown at you the other day. That was not our fault; my poor sister cried about it.

“I have told her how kind you look, and she says though you are the last person in

the world she ought to ask to see, yet she has no one else on earth: no one but me and our old nurse, in whose cottage she is dying; and she has something she *must* tell before she dies."

The letter had no signature but a scribbled name which looked like "Daisy." Zina's heart beat suddenly faster as she read it, and she began to feel as if she were walking on a mine. Who could tell what disclosures might come if she went to the cottage—the same cottage, the very mention of which had roused her husband's anger before?

She took her place at the dinner-table with a wretched sense of distrust—a sort of feeling of trying to enjoy herself just once, and after that the Deluge.

For the first time she felt as if it were a miserable comfort to have these people round

her, to be saved from a *tête-à-tête* just then with the man whom she began to dread as much as she had loved him; to be obliged to talk ordinary chit-chat, and to see that the servants performed their duties properly.

She had no longer time to be troubled by small conscientious difficulties, such as the paying at a high price, and keeping up the demand, for commodities cruelly obtained.

Indeed the handing of the *entrées*, and even the fear lest the ice-pudding should not be dished up properly (things which generally did not trouble her), seemed mercifully to shield her from the malady of thought.

She sat at the head of the table smiling and trying to eat, making a great show with her knife and fork, and hiding the fact that only infinitesimal morsels found their way to her mouth.

A *raconteur* who was present told tales which were greeted with laughter—tales capped by a lady who prided herself on her store of anecdote—*tant peu risqué*, as she said herself.

But Zina had never more thoroughly realised how all her own mirth had disappeared: the clashing chords of the merriment annoyed her, the jarring modulations could not reconcile her to the music. She did not guess that Eva was watching her anxiously as usual, as under the cover of the laughter her brow contracted, and the corners of her mouth twitted as she leaned back in her chair.

She was making up her mind to venture the desperate throw of a lonely walk to that cottage early on the following morning. She knew that it would be hopeless to try to escape that evening, but in the morning she

could plead her pressing need for a walk.

She slept little that night. Her heart was filled with an aching pity, yet she told herself in the weary hours that there was nothing to alarm her, that she was wrong to allow herself as on a former occasion to become the prey of a morbid imagination, and then dropping asleep to dream that once more, as in Switzerland, she had fallen into a snare spread for her by a forging enemy and that the handwriting was feigned—to wake again to the reality.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FATAL DISCOVERY.

ZINA stood irresolute on the threshold of the cottage the next morning, determined not to sink to the moral depth of a spy, and yet conscious of an impending horror, which sent a chill as if of ice through her veins.

For she had not even closed the door before the garrulous old woman, who had evidently qualms of conscience for the way in which she had treated Mrs. Layton before, began pouring out a story which made Zina's heart stand still.

At first she was even a little ashamed herself for her impulsiveness in having come, and was determined to keep her presence of mind in the emergency.

It was perfectly ridiculous, as she had been telling herself all through the night, to suppose that she should find out anything which could seriously affect George; all the same it would be cruel for her to refuse to visit this girl's sick sister; if there were a mystery, it was *her* duty to clear it up.

But alas, as she listened to the old woman's tale strange corroborations came to her memory!

The story might be perfectly imaginary, or it might be cooked up in spite, and yet, like the refractory fragments of a puzzle fitting into a definite outline so that instead of incongruities one begins to perceive a definite plan—it

fitted into all that had been difficult to explain in her married life. It was as if her reasoning power had been in thraldom before, and the iron gates swung open when a key was fitted into them.

For the first time she understood, and the revelation was blinding.

Upstairs a girl lay dying, who was younger than Zina--only five-and-twenty. And this girl, who had been a governess, had come, some years before, in the vacation, with her younger sister, an orphan like herself, to visit the old nurse who had taken care of them in their infancy.

Mr. Layton had paid his addresses to her, and afterwards--unknown to the nurse--he had followed her to another place--a country place, very secluded, where she had spent other holidays, and in the quietness of the country he

had gone through the ceremony of marriage.

A child had been born after this marriage—a marriage which had proved to be a mock ceremony, conducted by a mock clergyman—and the child was now between two and three years old.

The young mother had fallen dangerously ill when she found that her supposed husband refused to acknowledge her. Stricken by fever and almost penniless, she had dragged herself once more to her old nurse's cottage, and now, in her last hours, she refused to see a priest, and only asked for justice from the man who had abandoned her.

He had offered to make an ample provision for herself and the child, but she had faced starvation rather than take his money. And it was still with the idea of asserting her innocence, that she sent for the lady who occupied

the place which was rightfully hers, to shew what she had imagined to be her wedding lines, a foolish document by which she had been deceived, and to entreat her to help her.

“And I also might have fallen into the same snare; a mere accident saved me,” Zina was thinking to herself as she stood erect like a statue, not moving a muscle or shewing a sign of emotion.

“My instincts were correct, the snare was laid for *me*, though I blamed myself for recurring to the subject in a moment of passion.”

“I know now why it haunted me,” the voice within her continued as she sank into a chair, thinking, characteristically, less of the danger she had escaped than of the moral contamination she had incurred in coming in contact with one of those easy, unprincipled, self-indul-

gent men on whom so much love is wasted, and by whom so many lives are wrecked.

She was not what could be generally called a “goody” woman, still less a saintly one; she had thought little or nothing about Christianity since the days when she had discussed it with Mary as if it had been an intellectual problem, putting it aside from her as a thing she could not understand. Nor had she anything in common with the prudish British matron, who would draw her skirts away from touching a sister in degradation.

But she was an idealist like Shelley, looking upon all moral depravity as a crime against the spiritual nature of man, and, to a woman of her temperament, a revelation of this kind was harder to endure than it would be to most women, for she had a fastidious shrinking from anything which was unrefined.

And as sensation after sensation flashed upon her, she all at once began to shiver—not so much at the knowledge of the peril which had threatened her, as at the mental vision of the degradation which was actually hers.

“Take me up to her,” was all she said, still shivering as in midwinter, though it was a warm day in early spring. And an hour afterwards, instead of presiding over the dainties at the usual midday meal, Zina was still sitting by the bedside in that upstairs attic.

The light, which shone through the latticed windows, was so obscure that at first she could only see that some one lay in the bed, and that a ragged curtain had been fastened up to screen the occupant of what might rather be called a wooden pallet than a bed, from the draught of the door.

The room was otherwise neat and clean. A

small fire was burning in the grate, and the little hearth was freshly swept. As her eyes became by degrees accustomed to the light, she could see that the sufferer in the bed was supported by her younger sister, and that there was a strong personal likeness between the two. Both had eyes like agates, both had the same regular, small, refined features, and both the same droop in the corners of the lips. But the eyes of the dying woman were unnaturally large and wild, and her face painfully emaciated.

“She has been a cruel sufferer,” said the old woman, who had followed, limping painfully, up the stairs, as she went nearer to the sick woman, and lay her furrowed forehead against the thin cheek with a groan.

The younger woman did not answer; she was panting for breath. With one hand she

held a small paper, which nothing could persuade her to give up, and with the other she pointed to a little golden-haired child playing on the foot of the bed.

“They be her marriage lines, and she wants thee to see that she had them proper, and to promise to let some one take care of the child; she told us before thy coming that she had made up her mind to *that*, not to accept *his* money, but to leave *thee* to see to it,” the old woman explained, interpreting the dumb actions.

“There are hospitals, and places, where some one would see to Baby, and she thought perhaps it would not be too much to ask, if you would try to get her a ticket of admission,” vaguely interposed the frightened sister.

Zina nodded her head; she would have prom-

ised almost anything at that moment; all calculating prudences, and all minor considerations being waived in the presence of the death of a fellow-mortal. But as she drew nearer the bed and took the hand of the sufferer in hers, any spectator might have noticed, had the light been more effective, that she had turned of as deadly a hue as the dying woman.

She had a more violent fit of the shivering which had attacked her downstairs, but controlled it, looking at the suffering woman with moistened eyes as she struggled and fought for speech, her sister endeavouring to help her by pouring out some liquid which lay on the table, and putting it to her lips.

But she was evidently past swallowing, though by a determined effort she raised her weary

head, and motioned to a large Bible which lay on the table.

"It is for thee to pray and read," continued the faithful nurse, who was evidently well skilled in interpreting every motion of her darling's lips; "she wouldn't let the parson come nigh her. He called her a shameless and wicked girl, and said she ought to be driven away from the place."

Could any request have come more strangely to Zina? She felt confounded and stupefied as she opened the pages of the Bible, which had evidently been kept as an heirloom to be stared at rather than read.

"Read to her yourself," she said with an effort, and then was conscious of the absurdity of that request to the revengeful hag to whose lips cursing had come nearer than blessing.

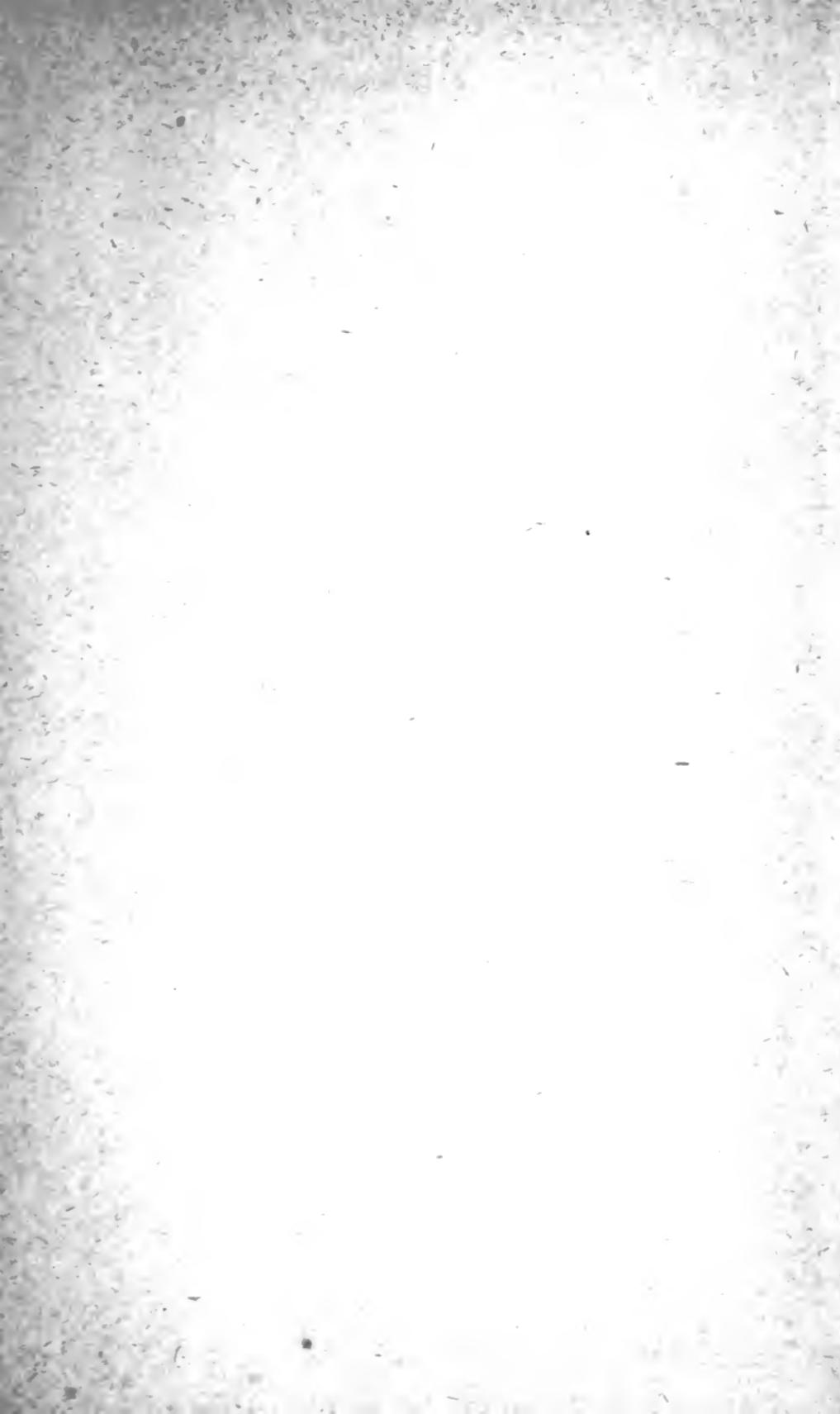
"Thoul't not refuse her when she be brought so low—thou hast been *that* good to her, to come and see her at all, and no doubt thou'st known suffering too," pleaded the old woman, in her new softened mood, in a whining voice, whilst the pleading was repeated in the longing eyes of the little sister, whose delicate arm shook as if palsied beneath the weight it was supporting.

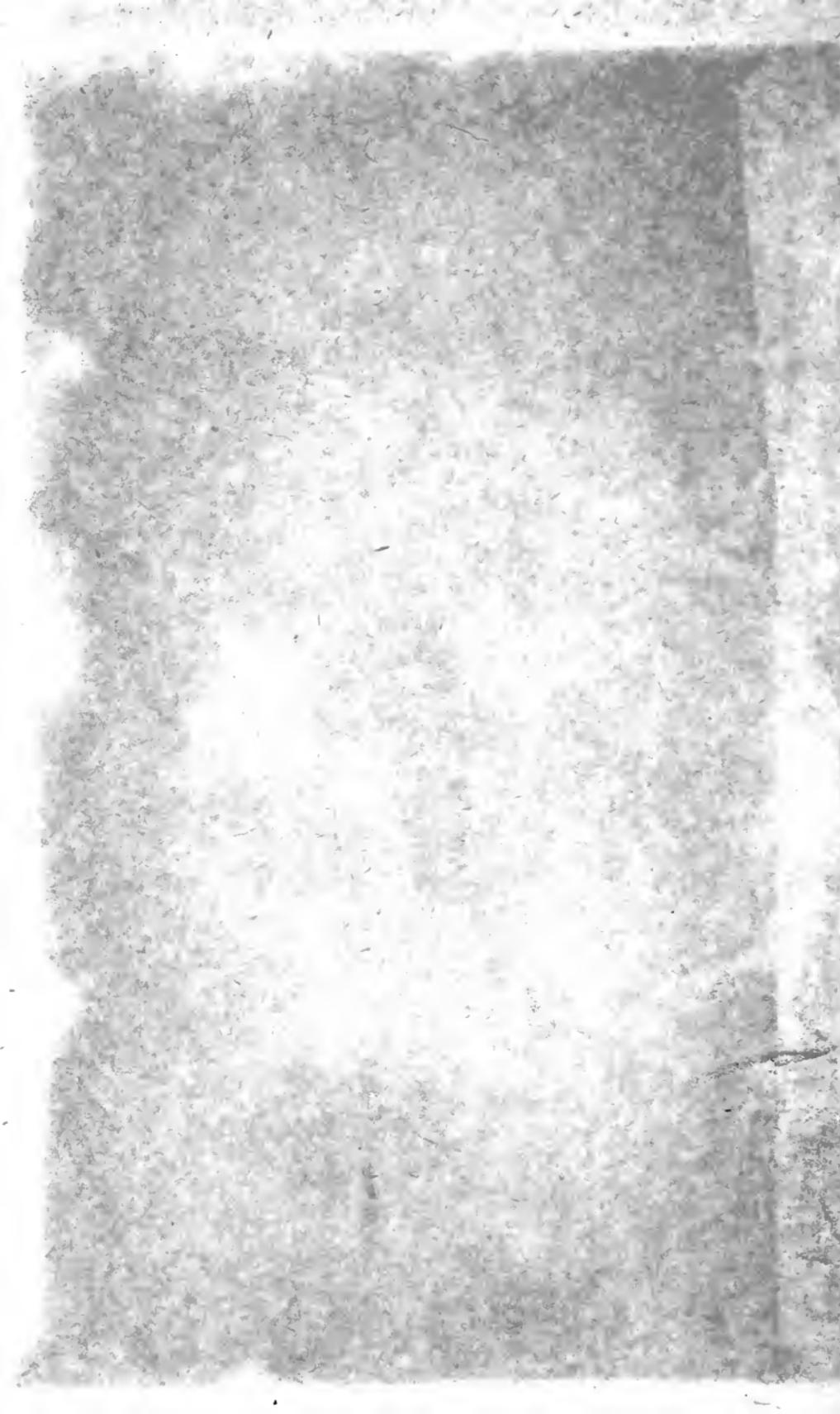
Zina could not read, she knew not where to turn to in the old-fashioned Book; but after minutes spent in battling with its unaccustomed pages she found herself unable to resist the earnest entreaty in the childlike eyes of the dying creature who had no mother's gown to pluck at in her great extremity. Some outward force seemed to compel her as she sank upon her knees, and stammered out "Our Father, which art in Heaven," the only simple,

old-fashioned words she could remember to utter.

Both women were as children crying in the night "with no language but a cry."

END OF VOL. II.







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